

Themes: the American Dream, success, likeability, abandonment, betrayal, morals and morality, the American West, Africa, Alaska, self-knowledge (esp. as part of tragedy), adequacy, sibling rivalry, marriage, illusion and reality, the location of Willy's house,

Willy's failure to recognize the anguished love offered to him by his family is crucial to the climax of his torturous day, and the play presents this incapacity as the real tragedy. Despite this failure, Willy makes the most extreme sacrifice in his attempt to leave an inheritance that will allow Biff to fulfill the American Dream. "Death of a Salesman: Arthur Miller." <<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/salesman/characters.html>> May 15, 2003

Mythic figures: David Seligman, Biff and Happy (compared with Adonis and Hercules),

Symbols: seeds, diamonds, stockings, the rubber hose

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Edwards, Jay. Arthur Miller: Study Questions, *Death of a Salesman*.  
<<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/1151/miller/studyque.htm>>. May 15, 2003.  
Arthur Miller

Death of a Salesman

Study Questions

for

Regular & Advanced

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Study Questions -- Regular Classes (advanced questions are below)  
Answer the following questions completely and in COMPLETE SENTENCES.

Setting the Stage

1. Describe Willy's house.
2. Describe Willy as he first appears.
3. What do the introductory remarks reveal about his wife, Linda?

Act One

1. Why is Linda worried when Willy returns unexpectedly from a sales trip?
2. Why isn't Willy working in New York?
3. Why did Willy expect Biff to amount to so much more than he has?

4. How are Biff and Happy different?
5. Why doesn't Biff like being at home? What does home serve to remind him of?
6. Who is Bill Oliver and what does Biff hope to get from him?
7. What were some of the things Willy tried to teach Biff as a boy?
8. In the scenes from the boys' childhood, how does Willy's treatment differ from his treatment of Happy?
9. What things does Happy say to get his father's attention?
10. What do you suppose Willy means when he says "the woods are burning"?
11. Why is Willy so proud of his ceiling?

#### Act Two

1. Why is Howard Wagner so unsympathetic to people like Willy?
2. Who was Dave Singleman and what impression did he have on Willy?
3. Describe Howard's reaction to Willy's problems.
4. Describe Bernard's success in later life.
5. What does Charley attempt to do for Willy?
6. How does Biff react when he realizes that Bill Oliver doesn't recognize him?
7. Why does Biff become upset with Willy in the restaurant?
8. What happened between Biff and Willy in Boston?
9. What is the twenty-thousand proposition Willy discusses with Ben?
10. How does Willy envision his funeral?
11. How does Ben respond to Willy's proposition?
12. In his anger, what does Biff attempt to force Willy to recognize?

#### Requiem

1. What is Happy's reaction to Willy's death?
2. Biff comments on things that made Willy happy. What type of activities were they?
3. What were Willy's dreams and why didn't he achieve them?

#### Speculation

1. To what extent is Willy's dream the American Dream?
2. What or who is responsible for Willy's death?

## Study Questions for the Advanced Student

### General Questions;

1. The following points about *Death of a Salesman* have been raised by drama critics over the years. Answer one of the following questions in composition form and the other two in paragraph form.

(a) Is *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy and Willy Loman a tragic hero, or is his death merely the pathetic demise of a small man? (Must a tragedy involve a great individual?)

(b) The dialogue of the play relies heavily on common speech, full of clichés and slang. Does the language detract from or enhance the character and theme? Defend your answer.

9c) What does the play say about this country's system of free enterprise and competition? (Consider the effects of money and the economic system on the characters of Willy, Biff, Happy, and Bernard as you work on the answer.)

2. Personal interaction operates on two levels in the play, one within the Loman family and one between the Lomans and the larger society. Which one level is *Death of a Salesman* most effective -- as a depiction of family conflicts or as a social commentary? Explain.

3. Define "The American Dream." In what way does *Death of a Salesman* point out the hopelessness of chasing this dream? Are there any rewards?

4. Toward the end of the play, Biff claims that "we never told the truth for ten minutes in this house." Do you agree or disagree? Support.

5. What does *Death of a Salesman* show about the role of a person like Willy in the society of today?

### The Characters:

#### WILLY

1. Who is to blame for Willy's destruction? Whose failure is it? (His own alone? Society? Family?)
2. "Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground." Was Willy talking just about planting a garden or could there have been a greater meaning?
3. Why won't Willy take the job Charley offers him?
4. What qualities does Willy admire in the legendary salesman, Dave Singleman? What do their names suggest about the two men?

#### BIFF

1. Why is Biff so angry about the incident in Boston? Which is he more angry about - infidelity or futile dreams?
2. Why does Biff steal? Love? Recognition? Acceptance? What effect does Willy have on his stealing?
3. Do you believe Biff when he says, "I know who I am, kid"? Why or why not?

#### LINDA

1. Is Linda a supportive or destructive force in her husband's life? (Does she understand what Willy wants or does her unquestioning support deny him the balance he needs?)

2. How do the two sons view their mother? What effects does Linda have on their relationship with other women?

3. Do you think Linda knew about Willy's infidelity?

#### HAPPY

1. In what ways is Happy like his father? How are they different? How has living in Biff's shadow affected Happy?

2. Is he "happy"?

3. What does Happy's womanizing reveal about him? (Why does he lie and tell his mother he's getting married? What kind of women is he attracted to?)

#### BEN

1. What does Willy's brother, Ben stand for in Death of a Salesman?

2. What does Ben mean when he says, "I walked into the jungle at 18 and walked out rich"?

Got questions or comments? Contact Jay Edwards