

Death of a Salesman
Arthur Miller

Presented by
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**Death
of a Salesman**

Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* addresses loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations, and arguments, all of which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life. The play concludes with Willy's suicide and subsequent funeral.



Willy Loman An aging salesman. He suffers from depression and anxiety as a result of his dissipating career, his estranged relationship with his oldest son, Biff, and his guilt over an extramarital affair. As the play progresses, Willy loses the ability to distinguish between the present and his memories of the past.

Linda Loman Willy Loman's wife. She is Willy's champion and takes it upon herself to reconcile her family. She will protect Willy at all costs, even if she must perpetuate his fantasies and deny his suicidal behavior.

Biff Loman The Lomans' older son. Biff has been estranged from Willy for over 15 years, during which time he has not been able to hold a steady job. Biff is the only member of the family who knows about Willy's affair, and he resents his father bitterly.

Happy Loman The Lomans' younger son. Happy is a womanizer driven by his sexuality. He works as an assistant but exaggerates his position and his authority.

Uncle Ben Willy's older brother. He made a fortune in the African jungle by the time he was 21 years old. He once offered Willy a job in Alaska. Ben appears in the play only in Willy's memories and fantasies.



Charley A long-time acquaintance of the Lomans. Charley supplies Willy with a weekly loan once Willy is put on straight commission, and he repeatedly offers him a job. Charlie is a true friend to Willy, even though Willy is jealous of him. Charley appears in Willy's memories, as well as in the actions of the present.

Bernard Charley's son. He provided Biff with answers while they were in high school and attempted to help Biff study so that he would graduate, even though Willy and Biff would criticize him. He is a successful lawyer. Bernard appears in Willy's memories, as well as in the present.

THE LIFE OF A SALISMAN

By [illegible]
[illegible]
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Act I

Death of a Salesman begins in the home of Willy Loman. Willy returns home exhausted from his latest sales excursion. He worries because he is having difficulty remembering events, as well as staying focused on the present. His wife, Linda, reassures him that he is only suffering from mental fatigue. Linda suggests that Willy should request a New York assignment rather than travel each week. At first Willy hesitates, complaining that his boss Howard does not respect his contributions to the company and might not listen to him, but Linda encourages Willy to tell Howard of his accomplishments. Willy decides to talk to Howard in the morning.

Willy and Linda argue about their son Biff. Willy calls Biff a "lazy bum," but Linda defends Biff on the premise that he is still trying to "find himself." Willy then contradicts his previous statement by saying that Biff is not lazy, and he decides to get Biff a job as a salesman. Willy drifts back into the past, remembering how everyone admired Biff when he was in high school. He comes out of his reverie and assures Linda that he is fine. He announces that he will no longer argue with Biff about his job. Linda suggests a picnic lunch, and Willy realizes that, all day, he thought he was driving the 1928 Chevy rather than the Studebaker.

CRITICAL ESSAYS
MAJOR THEMES IN
DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Death of a Salesman addresses loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations, and arguments, all of which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life. The three major themes within the play are denial, contradiction, and order versus disorder.

Each member of the Loman family is living in denial or perpetuating a cycle of denial for others. Willy Loman is incapable of accepting the fact that he is a mediocre salesman. Instead Willy strives for his version of the American dream — success and notoriety — even if he is forced to deny reality in order to achieve it. Instead of acknowledging that he is not a well-known success, Willy retreats into the past and chooses to relive past memories and events in which he is perceived as successful.

The second major theme of the play is contradiction. Throughout the play, Willy's behavior is riddled with inconsistencies. In fact, the only thing consistent about Willy is his inconsistency. From the very beginning of Act I, Scene 1, Willy reveals this tendency. He labels Biff a "lazy bum" but then contradicts himself two lines later when he states, "And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff — he's not lazy." Willy's contradictions often confuse audiences at the beginning of the play; however, they soon become a trademark of his character. Willy's inconsistent behavior is the result of his inability to accept reality and his tendency to manipulate or re-create the past in an attempt to escape the present.

The third major theme of the play, which is order versus disorder, results from Willy's retreats into the past. Each time Willy loses himself in the past, he does so in order to deny the present, especially if the present is too difficult to accept. As the play progresses, Willy spends more and more time in the past as a means of reestablishing order in his life. The more fragmented and disastrous reality becomes, the more necessary it is for Willy to create an alternative reality, even if it requires him to live solely in the past.

Denial, contradiction, and the quest for order versus disorder comprise the three major themes of *Death of a Salesman*. All three themes work together to create a dreamlike atmosphere in which the audience watches a man's identity and mental stability slip away. The play continues to affect audiences because it allows them to hold a mirror up to themselves. Willy's self-deprecation, sense of failure, and overwhelming regret are emotions that an audience can relate to because everyone has experienced them at one time or another. Individuals continue to react to *Death of a Salesman* because Willy's situation is not unique: He made a mistake — a mistake that irrevocably changed his relationship with the people he loves most — and when all of his attempts to eradicate his mistake fail, he makes one grand attempt to correct the mistake.



Good Luck

