

GCSE (9–1)

Teacher Guide

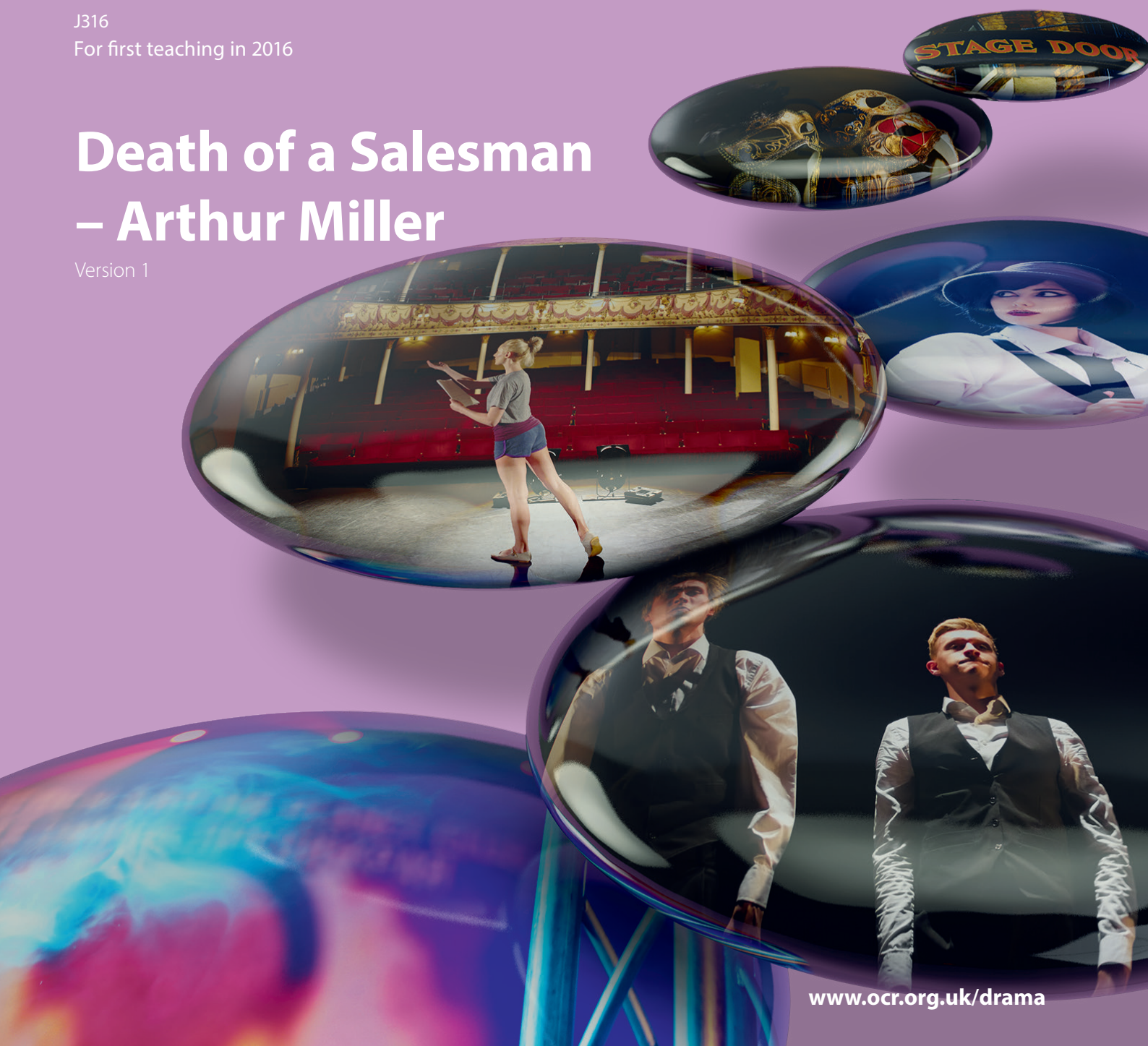
DRAMA

J316

For first teaching in 2016

Death of a Salesman – Arthur Miller

Version 1





Death of a Salesman

by *Arthur Miller*

Death of a Salesman is set 1949 Brooklyn, New York. It centres on the protagonist, Willy Loman and his family.

Synopsis

Willy is a travelling salesman nearing retirement age. In the opening scene he returns late at night from another failed sales trip. His wife, Linda, has been worried about him, fearing he has crashed his car. Seeing her husband tired by travel and worried for his health, she suggests that he ask his boss, Howard to give him work in the New York office to avoid travelling.

Willy and Linda have two sons, Biff and Happy, who are currently staying with their parents. Happy claims to be successful in a retail job whereas Biff is a farmhand in the west, and feels his life is going nowhere. The brothers have grand plans to go into business together – like their father, they both hope for success through hard work.

The play guides the audience through different phases in Willy's life, showing the past through flashbacks and daydreams. In act 1 Willy remembers happier times with his sons and Willy's relationship with his more successful brother, Ben.

Linda is supportive of her husband, but is aware that he has problems. She confides this in her sons early on in the play, telling them of Willy's suicide attempts and financial woes. When Willy arrives, he argues with Biff, but is distracted by Biff's plans to seek a business loan from a former employer the next day.

Having spoken to his wife, Willy asks his employer for a desk job, but instead finds himself fired. He visits a neighbour to ask for a loan and then goes to meet Biff and Happy at a restaurant. Biff and Happy are waiting at the restaurant – Biff tells Happy of his lack of success in securing a business loan, and feels that he was naïve to think that his former employer would remember him. When Willy arrives, Biff struggles to explain what

happened. Willy becomes distracted, remembering Biff's discovery of his affair with another woman. While he is distracted his sons leave the restaurant with two women they have met. Willy follows shortly afterward, asking for directions to somewhere he can purchase seeds.

When they return home, Linda is furious with them for abandoning their father. Willy is in the garden planting his seeds in the dark. Biff brings him inside to join the family, and tries to confront the family about their unrealistic 'American Dream' fantasies. Willy realises that Biff loves and cares for him, but this reinforces his desire to make Biff a 'success'.

In his state, Willy is unable to consider how to rationally help his sons achieve success, and takes his own life, hoping that Biff will be able to start a business with the insurance money.

Shortly after Willy's death, Linda announces that the final payment has been made on their mortgage and that they now own their home.

About the playwright and why he wrote *Death of a Salesman*

Death of a Salesman was written in 1949 by Arthur Miller. The play won the Pulitzer Prize and turned Miller into a national sensation. Miller drew from his own experiences of post-war America, his memories of the Great Depression as a young man and the consequences of growing up in a family facing financial hardship.

Miller's father's business suffered difficulties, and may have served as inspiration for the plot revolving around a failing father figure and the impact of the 'head of the household' struggling to cope.

Social, historical and political context

The play uses the painful conflicts of the Loman family to examine the larger issues surrounding American national values and the consequences of having blind faith in the American Dream. While the idealism of the American Dream may feel stale in this age of constant cynicism, at the time of its writing, the disillusionment of *Death of a Salesman* was quite radical.

After the Second World War, the United States faced profound domestic tensions. The war had damaged the American feeling of confidence, prosperity and security, and the US became increasingly embroiled in a tense 'cold war' with the Soviet Union. The propaganda ideal

of the peaceful, homogenous and nauseatingly gleeful America was mixed with anxiety about Communism and racial conflict. Many American playwrights, artists and others fought against the idea of capitalist success as the basis for social approval, disturbed that so many American families centred their lives around material possessions (cars, appliances, and especially the newly introduced television), often in an attempt to keep up with their equally materialistic neighbours. During *Death of a Salesman*, Willy brings home several appliances purchased on credit in order to ensure that he could 'keep up' with his neighbours.

The structure of the play

Death of a Salesman is a two-act play, with the original full title of '*Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem*'. The mention of a requiem in the title instils a sense of foreboding, making it apparent from the outset that a death will occur during the course of the play.

All of the action takes place during a 24 hour period between Monday evening and Tuesday, excepting the requiem which takes place at a later date, at Willy's funeral.

The climax happens in the scene at Frank's Chop House, and then when Biff confronts Willy at home.

The falling action takes place in the Requiem – though the play is not structured as a classic drama, this section is the closest match for 'falling action'.

As preparation students might find it helpful to watch this education clip from the BBC, it explains the structure of the play and Arthur Miller discusses the accuracy of Willy's memories and why the way he remembers them affects him. (www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zg9pyrd)

Exploring the play

Looking at the stage directions and unpicking the intentions of Arthur Miller will help in the deconstruction of the text; the tone of Miller's stage directions and dialogue ranges from sincere to parodying. In general Miller has been sensitive to the very real pain that the characters are suffering but at times he is also downright brutal, the tone can be seen as mocking Willy's complete fixation on the shallow, materialistic focus of the American Dream.

You may want to explore what the genre of the play is and why it fits within a certain genre. *Death of a Salesman* comes under the genres of tragedy, social commentary and family drama.

Students are expected to work practically to understand the text and then they will be assessed on their knowledge and understanding through a written exam. Students need to analyse and interpret with an in-depth focus on all the characters and the social, historical and political context. Students need to also understand how the design and production elements of the text

would come together and need to think imaginatively and creatively. When working on extracts students should explore the relationship between characters, the proxemics between actors and audience and how the stage directions shape the performance. The study of characters is integral, while text study around themes should help students to place characters, plot and devices into their appropriate social, historical and cultural contexts.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored within a play.

The American Dream, abandonment and betrayal are at the heart of *Death of a Salesman*.

The American Dream

Willy is completely consumed by the promise of the American Dream –the idea that a 'well liked' and 'personally attractive' businessman will automatically acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life. Sadly, what he fails to understand is that



the American Dream is about success through hard work without complaining. He fixates on superficial qualities of attractiveness and likeability, his interpretation of likeability is childish. For example; he dislikes Bernard because he thinks that Bernard is a nerd. This obsession with the American Dream leads to his psychological decline when he is unable to cope with the illusion of 'the Dream' and what his own life actually is.

Abandonment

Willy's life goes from one abandonment to the next, leaving him in greater despair each time.

It begins where Willy's father leaves him and his brother, Ben, when Willy is very young. This consequently leaves Willy with no money or any sort of legacy to inherit. Then his brother, Ben leaves him. As we see during the flashbacks in the play he goes to Alaska and now Willy is alone and he falls for this warped vision of the American Dream. Naturally, we see that Willy then develops a fear of abandonment; he feels safe with the idea of the 'American Dream' and this makes him want his family to conform to the American Dream to ensure they are safe too. The pressure he then puts on himself to raise 'perfect' sons just simply shows his inability to understand reality. Willy's obsession with attractiveness lands him in hot water when he commits adultery and consequently a young Biff (whom Willy considers the embodiment of promise) no longer has any interest in his father or his plans for him anymore. Willy's failing as a salesman has started to impact on Biff who also now has an inability to succeed in business and as the 'promise' Willy hoped Biff had doesn't come to fruition; it causes further estrangement from Willy. Willy is once again 'abandoned' at Frank's Chop House when Biff ruins Willy's illusions when he gets over excited about Biff's potential opportunity. Biff tells Willy he is deluded and abandons Willy babbling in the washroom.

Betrayal

Sadly Willy's main obsession throughout the play is what he considers to be Biff's betrayal of his ambitions for him. When Biff walks out on Willy's ambitions for him, he doesn't handle this well and takes this rejection personally. Ironically, Willy is a salesman and yet he can't even convince his own son to buy into the 'American Dream'. This, after all, is the product that Willy believes in most faithfully. Willy wrongly assumes that Biff's betrayal has all come from discovering his affair in Boston with 'the Woman'. Biff feels that his father is a "phony little fake" and he feels betrayed because of Willy's never-ending stream of ego-boosting lies. Less subtly, but of course still significant, is the literal betrayal of Linda when Willy has his affair with 'The woman' in Boston.

Performance characteristics

For Death of Salesman students will need knowledge and understanding of basic skills, mediums and techniques used within drama to achieve performance. It would be worth exploring the concept of cross cutting and using flashbacks as a technique because the play jumps around in different time periods throughout. Character building exercises will be helpful, as will blocking, maintaining appropriate amounts of props, lighting and sound effects to add to dramatic form rather than detract from or overwhelm it.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Seeds

Seeds represent for Willy the opportunity to grow as both as a salesman and a father. At the start of the play he stands in his back yard and proclaims with sheer frustration:

"The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard."

The symbolism of the seeds also stems from his feeling of being trapped and his hunger for the fresh air; he hates feeling boxed in and having a street lined with cars. He is desperate to grow fresh vegetables, which is also an indication of the financial difficulties the family faces. He can barely afford to put food on the table and he worries, like his own father, that he will leave and/or have nothing to pass to his children. The seeds also symbolise Willy's sense of failure with Biff. He wanted more than anything for Biff to be a success with his American football dreams and Willy thought his success was a dead-cert. He went to great lengths to boost Biff and ensure he was successful. When he finally realises that Biff is in fact lazy, Willy takes it as a reflection of his abilities as a father, rather than this being Biff's failing with a clear lack of ambition.

Diamonds

Obviously diamonds represent wealth and could be seen as a validation of hard work and the ability to pass on material goods to your offspring – these are two things that Willy desperately wants to be able to do and have. For Willy, it is hard for him as his brother, Ben, made a discovery of diamonds which made him a fortune and this once again reaffirms Willy's failure as a salesman. Despite Willy being offered the opportunity to go to Alaska with Ben where he would have made this discovery with him, he wouldn't do it because he felt

the 'American Dream's' promise of financial security was safer than the Alaska adventure! Towards the end of the play you see Ben encouraging Willy to enter the "jungle" finally and retrieve his 'diamond' - that is, to kill himself for insurance money in order to make his life meaningful.

Ladies' stockings

Willy's appears to have a strange obsession with the condition of Linda's stockings. As an audience we can assume this is because of the guilt he must feel for the affair he has had. He can give his mistress stockings as a gift but yet his own wife has to darn and fix her tights, adding to the impression of their poverty. This poverty is further embedded by Biff accusing Willy of giving away Linda's stockings to 'The Woman'. Stockings can be seen as a symbol of betrayal and sexual infidelity. When Willy buys both 'The Woman' and then finally Linda new stockings, they are important and significant for Willy's pride, showing financial success, providing for his family and of course to ease his guilt for his betrayal of both Linda and Biff.

The Rubber hose

The stage prop of the rubber hose is there to remind the audience of Willy's desperate attempts at suicide. Linda explains that he has apparently attempted to kill himself by inhaling gas. There is great irony in him trying to kill himself through gas. This is the one basic element that his home needs to provide his family warmth and comfort; yet he would rather inhale gas and cause death as he struggles to afford such a basic necessity for his family.

Staging requirements

When staging *Death of a Salesman* it is crucial to look at the information that Miller has provided in the stage directions. The opening directions describe a complete house for the Loman's. As an audience they do not simply watch the action take place in the kitchen or the bedroom the audience needs to be able to observe several rooms within the home. This doesn't necessarily need to be all at once, so a revolving or two tier stage is an option. When staging the play the students need to consider the consequences of having more than one character on stage and where the audience should be directing their attention to. The stage directions from Miller solves this problem by giving information through lighting. Only characters that are talking or involved in direct action are lit on stage. All other rooms, characters, and props remain in shadow. This is a consideration that students need to take into account when thinking about blocking through and staging the play.

The major benefit for an audience is the speed between scenes. The change of a lighting state is much quicker than waiting while a substantial scene changes happens. With so many flashbacks, the use of lighting would also be helpful to indicate to the audience that a flashback is happening. Willy's dreams, memories, or recollections of past events must be revealed in a manner that is distinct from actions taking place in the present. Don't forget to point out to students that the stage directions in Act I describe the house as having "An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream arising out of reality."

Even though the action shifts around the house, the action is always in the present. This is important for two reasons:

1. The audience must be able to differentiate between the present and the past.
2. Willy's increased agitation must be apparent; there is no better way to reveal that than to have the audience witness his inability to separate the past from the present.

Miller achieves this effect by manipulating the space and boundaries of the rooms. It is crucial for students to understand that when action takes place in the present, characters observe wall boundaries and enter and exit through the doors. Whenever there are moments of Willy recalling the past the characters do not observe wall boundaries, and the action generally takes place in the area at the front of the stage, rather than inside the house. This enables the audience to be able to distinguish the present from the past.

Sound design opportunities with the use of the flute, the New York soundscape and the car sounds that are all needed to tell the story. Sound can be used to create the dreamlike state. Characters can have their own music. Willy is associated with the flute melody, Ben has own music, whenever we hear laughter this is related to The Woman.

Explaining the power of sound design within staging the play is essential in them understanding how the audience automatically associates certain sounds with certain characters. Ben's music for example may create anxiety for the audience because his presence has an impact on Willy and towards the end of the play when he appears it suggests to the audience that an alternate, more disturbing, end to the play is possible.

It needs to be pointed out to students that, as the play progresses, the action shifts to the front of the stage. This relates back to the effect of Miller's manipulation of space

and boundaries; the audience should now be becoming more aware that the majority of the action is taking place inside Willy's head.

Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

If we have read it, do we need to perform it?

The text is not to be studied as a piece of literature but as the basis of a theatrical performance to an audience. The component is examined by written paper but is studied predominantly through practical experience to fully understand Performance to then respond to.

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Do we need American accents?

Miller wrote the play based on the theme of the American Dream, so when exploring the play the students should consider the emphasis on middle-class American lingo.

Must we see a staged production of the play?

This is not essential, but it can certainly help for students who struggle with the time periods and jumping around. Sometime after studying a play for a long period of time, watching a production as a revision technique can be really helpful.

How to approach the exam

Students will have a 1 hour 30 minute exam and should spend about 55 minutes on Section A.

The questions will vary in their length of answer, difficulty and style of response.

The paper is predominately assessing that students understand how characters and performance portray ideas and meanings to an audience.

The students don't need to remember great reams of quotes for their exam, but if they can learn a few key quotes this might help them to emphasis a point they are making. Students need to be taught how to justify any ideas or opinions they may have interpreted from the text. They can't simply just state an example. They need to be able to back this up, and in doing so, will be showing further understanding.

Students should have had the opportunities during their

study to consider directing and designing, as well as performing, coming up with ideas and trying things out where possible. When staging scenes they should also be given the chance to perform as various characters. Students who always opt to perform Linda for example will be limited in their understanding and empathy of other characters for the exam.

Students need to try out staging or rehearsal ideas and techniques which might turn out to be unsuccessful. The learning opportunities afforded to them by it not being successful will be useful for them to grasp the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches.

Suggested Activities

What comes first?

The teacher should prepare the historical, social, cultural contexts and a synopsis of the plot with simple descriptions of the characters. Watching the film is one way of preparing for this, or using resources from previously staged productions. Many directors choose not to watch existing material, or let their cast watch another director's interpretation. Many teachers don't let students watch a film version either as it can be difficult to then get students to focus on stage version.

Text or film?

If the film is to be used as background research for the students, it could be shown before or after a round the class read through at least. Pausing the footage to give teacher commentary on Miller's stage directions, effects, concepts and character traits can be helpful. It could also be helpful to take students to see a production of the play or get in a touring company to watch the production as a good introduction to the play.

Themes?

Teachers may start by using a key theme to introduce the text. It would be helpful to prepare improvisation work set in a contemporary situation to start students off. For example, the theme of betrayal is an easy theme to get them all thinking; in groups or individually students can think of a time when they have been/or have felt betrayed. You can explore an element of knowing that someone is being betrayed and what you do with this information (giving the perspective of Biff). Work can then develop on from this. Asking students to take a symbol from the play (a prop for example) and then adding this to their discussion ideas based around betrayal might start to create some interesting work, for example:

- A student feels betrayed when she confides in her friend that she has a boyfriend and she hasn't told her parents. She says she is going to stay at this house this weekend and doesn't want her parents to know so asks to stay with her friend that she is confiding in.
- The friend feels that she must do the right thing and tell her parents that this is going on.
- Consequently, she is betraying her friend's confidence in her.
- When the symbols are given out (diamond, stockings, seeds and rubber hose) the group may choose to go with stockings and link to the sexual/love aspect of the example they have given so far.

Director's viewpoint?

As a way of introducing the director's perspective, students are asked to repeat their preferred theme improvisation, but this time with one of each group taking the role of director, shaping the group's work for presentation and to convey the message of the piece.

Start with the opening scene?

With the way in which the play jumps around in time periods but is always in the present, you might want to logically begin with the opening scene. However, if you want to begin by analysing the title of the play and discuss the sense of foreshadowing, it may make more sense to start with the requiem, where we know he has died and the revelations that then come out during his funeral. This might be really revealing for students as you then begin the play and start to understand the characters more.

Aiming for performance?

Although the assessment of the text will ultimately be through a written exam, there is nothing stopping students preparing the text for performance. Some students may find that their performance to an audience and the feedback they receive an extremely useful way of understanding if their performance is clear and effective.





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