

DEATH OF A SALESMAN



- 1** Analyze whether the primary characters are dynamic or static.
- 2** Willie and Biff are both accused of being “boys” instead of men (Biff even accuses himself of this). What are some concrete details from the play that support this characterization? Do either of these brothers change or grow by the end of the play?
- 3** Explore details in the play that suggest Willie’s lack of self-awareness.
- 4** Most of the time, you can infer what people are like by the things they say and the way they act. Draw some conclusions about several of the major characters in the play (think of descriptive characterizations like “idealistic,” “optimistic,” “deluded,” “competitive,” “immoral,” etc.—think of your own) and then trace what action or dialogue in the play supports leads you to this interpretation of character.
- 5** Explore details in the play that illustrate Happy’s “overdeveloped sense of competition.” Observe also those details that give audiences a sense of how he came to have this character flaw.
- 6** A simplistic conclusion to draw about Willie is that he’s suffering because of senility or Alzheimer’s. Develop a more complex interpretation of the play that demonstrates how Willie’s problems are psychological rather than physical—that he’s suffering from emotional distress rather than physical disease.
- 7** Consider Willie’s brother, Ben. “I went into the jungle at the age of 17 and came out at the age of 21. And, by God, I was rich!” What does this boast tell us about Ben’s character? In one scene he “blindsides” Biff, saying, “Never fight fair, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way.” From this incident and other details in the play, what can you infer about Ben’s moral code? Is it his personal, individual code, or does it seem to reflect American culture in some larger, broader way? How do Ben’s morals compare to Willie’s? Does Willie misinterpret or distort Ben’s example or was it corrupt to begin with?
- 8** Linda is left alone at the end of the play, standing with her children and Charley by Willie’s grave. In her last moments with him, she confesses that she simply doesn’t understand why he’s left her alone. The last image is of her lifting her hands in question. Why hasn’t her steadfast love been able to see Willie through? Does the audience understand what Linda doesn’t (dramatic irony)? In what ways has Linda been blind about Willie?

- 9 When Biff defines himself as a “\$1.00/hr. man” and Willie as just another “hard working drummer who fell on the ash heap,” is he being fair to himself and Willie? Is he seeing the truth, or is he deliberately pouring acid on Willie’s dreams? Biff insists that Willie never “knew himself.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
- 10 Why does Willie insist that the basis of success is to be “well-liked”? Is he right or wrong? His whole life he’s strived to be loved, but has had very little success—especially professionally. What about this philosophy makes Willie especially vulnerable as a salesman? What role has his childhood played in his emotional weakness? How has this weakness led to tragedy?
- 11 In what way does the father/son relationship shared by Charlie and Bernard provide a foil (a provocative contrast) for the relationship between Willie and Biff?
- 12 Some have accused Arthur Miller of writing an overly depressing play. Miller’s reply is to the effect that he’s sorry if the salvation of the son isn’t satisfying enough for some people. Do you think Biff is saved at the end of *Death of A Salesman*? Why or why not?
- 13 Is Willie’s death at the end of the play “depressing” or “tragic”? Develop your answer by finding a definition of these two concepts and applying your definitions to an analysis of the play.
- 14 In the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes the point that dramatic art stems from the instinct of imitation and the instinct for harmony. Art imitates reality, but provides an ordering, a harmony. He maintains that “in the finest kind of tragedy the structure should be complex...represent[ing] terrible and piteous events” (*CBIL*, p. 1092). When “good people” suffer, the audience is repulsed; on the other hand if “bad people” prosper we find little to sympathize with. Tragedy should elicit our sympathies—it should “stir pity and fear” (1092). In order to do this, a play must present a hero who seems neither purely good nor purely evil, but someone who falls ambiguously in between. Real people readily identify with this mixture, making it more likely that we’ll feel pity for the person who suffers seemingly undeservedly. An “excellent” plot is one in which the hero’s fortune changes for the worse because of some great, tragic mistake (the hero’s tragic flaw), as opposed to mere coincidence or interference from divine sources (*deus ex machina*).
Questions: How might *Death of a Salesman* be considered a tragedy in Aristotle’s sense of the word? Does it present “terrible and piteous events”? Is the play “cathartic” in that it moves the audience to feel both pity and fear? Can any of the characters, especially Willie, be considered a tragic character according to Aristotle’s definition?
- 15 Aristotle maintains that characters should have four qualities: (1) goodness—their dialogue reveals their moral choices, and they choose good over evil; (2) appropriateness (i.e., their characteristics don’t challenge our deeply-held assumptions or expectations; men are “masculine” and women are “feminine,” for example; (3) verisimilitude—they are lifelike rather than superhuman; we can believe they might be real people; and (4) consistency—once a character’s traits are established he/she should not act unexpectedly “out of character.” **Questions:** Analyze Willie’s character in light of Aristotle’s criteria. What are his moral choices? Does he make the “good” choice? Is Willie’s behavior “appropriate” (within a range of expectations, does he act like a husband and a father is “supposed” to act)? Is Willie a lifelike, believable character? What are some of his traits, his individual ways of thinking, speaking, or behaving that remain consistent throughout the play?
- 16 Aristotle further maintains that the end of the action, the conclusion of the plot, should flow organically from the characters’ behavior and personalities. Character—not coincidence or divine intervention—is what determines fate. In a well plotted drama, understanding the sequence of cause and effect—the chain of consequence that leads inexorably to the tragic end—is crucial. **Questions:** Does Willie’s final act, his suicide, make sense in light of his behavior throughout the play? Does it follow logically or does it come as a surprise? How has Miller prepared the audience for this outcome?
- 17 The quotes listed below are from Arthur Miller’s essay, “Tragedy And The Common Man.” Choose one or more of Miller’s assertions as the basis for an analysis of *Death of a Salesman*.
- “The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity.”
 - “[The tragic flaw is] the hero’s unwillingness to be passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status.”
 - “Observing the individual pitted against the unchangeable environment elicits our pity and fear. When the consequence of this individual evaluating himself justly results in his destruction, that suggest an evil or a wrong in his environment. This is the moral lesson of tragedy—its discovery of moral law.”
 - “Tragedy involves a questioning of the conditions of life—the tragedist must be fearless about questioning everything; no institution is immutable, everlasting, inevitable. It is all brought forth for examination. For instance, the “naturalness” of the value of “getting ahead” in American culture.”
 - “Tragedy is not pessimistic...”