

DEATH OF A SALESMAN
BY
ARTHUR MILLER



Classroom Notes Part II
MA English, Semester II
ENGL4007: Modern Drama

Umesh Patra
Department of English
Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari

A note on these notes...

- Do you think this PPT can replace an actual classroom, where you gossip with your friends and peacefully sleep during by my long-winded antics?
- **Of course, not.**
- Do you think this PPT can replace the texts prescribed in your syllabus?
- **Of course, not. Then what are these notes worth?**
- These notes are just to excite your curiosity for the ideas discussed. To reap most benefits of the notes, read the texts first.
- By the time, you must have noticed there are two inks used here. It's an interactive PPT. The black ink is for me and the red is yours. Pause and think when the **red ink** appears. Wow end-rhyme.



I assume you have read the play.

- Death of a Salesman was a staggering success both on stage and screen by Arthur Miller.
- Staged in 1949, it won [Pulitzer Prize](#) for Drama, [Tony Award](#), and was adapted into several [movie](#) and TV Adaptations. **Do you know any other Pulitzer Prize winners? Google Eugene O'Neill.**
- This play reflects on a number of themes such as the American Dream, Parental Expectations, Problems of the Common Men, Ambition, Reality and Falsehood.
- It also acquainted us with a number of memorable characters like Willy, Happy, Biff, Bernard, Uncle Ben and others.
- **Do you think you too are burdened with too much expectations from society. Well, you must read this play then.**



Willy Loman

- Of course the salesman in the title is Willy Loman. Notice how his name itself symbolises his character.
- He ‘wills’ to achieve great success in life. Yet he is a ‘low man’ or ‘no man’. That is to say, he is a common man with astounding ambitions.
- Do you know any other ambitious tragic heroes? What about Macbeth?
- The best portrait of Willy is made by his wife Linda who says:

“I don’t say he’s a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.”



Willy Loman

- Willy believes that “if a man was impressive, and well liked”, he is bound to be successful.
- That’s why he always tries to keep up appearances. Throughout the play, he is seen in shining boots and ironed suits.
- He keeps smiling even through terrible times, and cannot bear to realise that the world is not smiling with him. He lives his entire life like a salesman.
- After a day of failure, he tries to find a good news to tell his wife. That’s the level of his optimism, or rather escapism.
- Even his affair was an escape from reality as were his talks with Uncle Ben.
- Finally, he even escaped the world through a wilful accident.



Linda Loman

- Linda is the perfect companion of Willy, even though she was unaware of his affair with a mysterious lady.
- Linda knows that Willy is thinking of committing suicide, yet does not confront him regarding that.
- She knows the true potential of her husband and her sons. In order to keep the family intact, she accepts their lies.
- When Willy talks roughly with her, she tolerates that and always offers him consolation and motivation.
- Willy loves her immensely. He says, “I was fired, and I’m looking for a little good news to tell your mother, because the woman has waited and the woman has suffered.”
- Have you ever smiled while sad just to keep your friends and family happy? Then you could identify with Linda.



Biff Loman

- Biff is the favourite son of Willy. As a 19 year old youth, he was enthusiastic, sporty, and confident. As a 34 year old man, he is the melancholic, lazy, and a failure. **What happened when he was 19?**
- The turn in his character was due to *his witnessing his father along with a mysterious lady in a room in Boston* after his Ebbets Field game.
- He thought of his father as a 'fake', and lost all hope from life. "After high school he took so many correspondence courses. Radio mechanics; television; God knows what, and never made the slightest mark."
- He left home and worked odd jobs including that of a shipping clerk. He stole things from people and was even jailed for three months.



Biff Loman

- Even though Biff lost respect for his father, he also resembled him in many respects. Like his father, he thought of himself as a salesman and imagined that he worked for Bill Oliver. In fact, Bill Oliver had no knowledge of him.
- Biff loved the outdoors and had a poetic attitude towards life. He wanted to be outdoor with his shirt off, whistle in elevators. The formal suit and tie was not the appropriate attire for him.
- At the end of the play, he embraces the truth of his personality and shatters the illusion of his parents too.
- Unfortunately, this realization comes too late for Willy. He was so touched by Biff's love for him, that he decided to commit suicide to secure a future for him.
- **Did you chose a profession to make society happy while you longed for a different life? Then, you can identify with Biff.**



Happy Loman

- As his name suggests, Happy Loman, the younger brother of Biff, was a happy go lucky kind of guy. He is even a bit shallow.
- Neither his parents nor his brother pinned their hopes on him. So he grew up, hankering for love from a number of women he could find.
- He became a philandering bum in the words of Linda. Throughout the play, he is ignored by his family, but he never reacts angrily like Biff.
- He lets his father continue with his madness, his brother continue with his odd jobs. At the end of the play, it was Happy who decides to follow the path of his father and become a salesman in their hometown.
- **Did you ever see differential treatment in a family among siblings?**



Uncle Ben

- It's only through the visions of Willy that we can see Uncle Ben. In his words, "When I was 17 I walked into a jungle, when I was 21 I got out, and by God, I was rich".
- Ben was the dreamy projection of the American Dream which stands for the immense possibility America holds for any hardworking, ambitious man.
- Willy wanted to follow Ben into Alaska, but did not. He chose to stay home with his family in New York and become a successful salesman. Throughout his life, Willy cannot forgive leaving "that road not taken". [Remember Robert Frost...](#)
- After consulting with Ben, Willy decides to lay down his life.
- **Uncle Ben can stand for any human being that you look up to as a model of success.**



Charlie

- Unlike Uncle Ben, Charlie is a practical man who becomes moderately successful in New York. He is the neighbour and friend of Willy.
- Unlike Willy, Charlie never showed much interest in his kid Bernard's education. It so happens that Bernard becomes a successful lawyer while Happy and Biff are yet to find directions in their lives.
- Charlie continuously loans him money and even offers him a job, but Willy can't take the job because of his injured pride. Charlie says, “You been jealous of me all your life, you damned fool!”
- A true friend of Willy, he understands him perfectly. At the requiem, he says, “Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He's a 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. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.”



Bernard

- As Charlie is the antithesis of Willy, so is his son Bernard an antithesis of Biff. As a child, he was a nerdy guy who paid way too much attention on studies while Biff excelled in sports.
- But when adult, he was a successful young man in an enviable white collar job, while Biff was still finding himself.
- Willy asks him, “What’s the secret?”, “How—how did you? Why didn’t he [Biff] ever catch on?” Bernard too was puzzled by the way Biff left all hope after one particular trip to Boston.
- It’s through him we gather that there was a secret between Willy and Biff, that no other characters are aware.
- **What do we call that? Yes, dramatic irony.**



Loman as a Tragic Hero

- Like any tragedy, it has a protagonist who is willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice to fulfil his personality. Willy lays down his life smilingly as an ultimate price to secure a better deal for his family.
- He also has a tragic flaw, rather too many of them. He is dreamy and has no real grip of reality. He erases from his memory what he finds unbearable.
- Thus, he thinks of himself as a successful salesman, while it does not appear so in the play. He thinks greatly of Biff, while the latter convinces him that he is just “a dime a dozen”. **That is to say he is an ordinary man.**
- As a character, on whom depend the lives of his family, Willy proves a perfect, yet common tragic hero.



Anagnorisis and Peripeteia

- What's [anagnorisis](#)? It's a revelation of some important information in the course of a narrative. The revelation leads to [peripeteia](#), or reversal of fortune.
- Okay, these are big words. Click on the hyperlinks to learn more. But let's say that in a tragedy, there is a discovery of truth, one vital information which will change the life of the tragic protagonist from top to bottom.
- Remember how Oedipus learnt that he was the person responsible for the plague and that changed his life in a jiffy.
- In this play too, the anagnorisis comes in Willy's life when he is told that his sons and he himself were just common American men without any exceptional talents.



Anagnorisis and Peripeteia

- We may also say that when Biff learns about his father's affair with a lady, this discovery leads to a reversal in his fortune.
- Willy had suppressed that memory in his mind. Towards the end of the play, he realises that it was Willy himself who had ruined his son's life by one stray incident.
- Despite his life-long encouragement, his single flaw, and its discovery led to the hopeless and kleptomaniac life of Biff.
- In a way, Willy falls twice in the play as a tragic character: a) first, in the eyes of his son Biff when he finds him in the hotel, b) second, when he realises that his sons are unexceptional ordinary young men with no majestic prospects in life.



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“A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man.”

Do you think that your problems are as grave as of those you consider as great people?

