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| **Writer’s Intent** | **Characters** | | | | | |
| The play is concerned with the human condition and the pressures of modern living, specifically the cut and thrust of the world of the salesman in mid-twentieth century America.  Miller uses the play to offer an indictment of the American capitalist system; in it he exposes the potentially harmful and destructive ideology of the ‘American Dream’.  The Tragedy of the Common Man: Miller believed that “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were”.  Traditional tragedy may have dealt with men of greatness and stature, with a kingdom in crisis, but *Death of a Salesman* centres on the average man and his private, domestic sphere. | **Willy Loman** | An insecure, self- deluded traveling salesman. Willy believes wholeheartedly in the American Dream of easy success and wealth, but he never achieves it. Nor do his sons fulfil his hope that they will succeed where he has failed. When Willy’s illusions begin to fail under the pressing realities of his life, his mental health begins to unravel. The overwhelming tensions caused by this disparity, as well as those caused by the societal imperatives that drive Willy, form the essential conflict of *Death of a Salesman* | | **Biff Loman** | | Willy’s thirty-four-year-old elder son. Biff led a charmed life in high school as a football star with scholarship prospects, good male friends, and fawning female admirers. He failed math, however, and did not have enough credits to graduate. Since then, his kleptomania has gotten him fired from every job that he has held. Biff represents Willy’s vulnerable, poetic, tragic side. He cannot ignore his instincts, which tell him to abandon Willy’s paralyzing dreams and move out West to work with his hands. He ultimately fails to reconcile his life with Willy’s expectations of him. |
| **Linda Loman** | Willy’s loyal, loving wife. Linda suffers through Willy’s grandiose dreams and self-delusions. Occasionally, she seems to be taken in by Willy’s self-deluded hopes for future glory and success, but at other times, she seems far more realistic and less fragile than her husband. She has nurtured the family through all of Willy’s misguided attempts at success, and her emotional strength and perseverance support Willy until his collapse. | | **Happy Loman** | | Willy’s thirty-two-year-old younger son. Happy has lived in Biff’s shadow all of his life, but he compensates by nurturing his relentless sex drive and professional ambition. Happy represents Willy’s sense of self-importance, ambition, and blind servitude to societal expectations. Although he works as an assistant to an assistant buyer in a department store, Happy presents himself as supremely important. Additionally, he practices bad business ethics and sleeps with the girlfriends of his superiors. |
| **Charley** | Willy’s next-door neighbour. Charley owns a successful business and his son, Bernard, is a wealthy, important lawyer. Willy is jealous of Charley’s success. Charley gives Willy money to pay his bills, and Willy reveals at one point, choking back tears, that Charley is his only friend. | | **Bernard** | | Bernard is Charley’s son and an important, successful lawyer. Although Willy used to mock Bernard for studying hard, Bernard always loved Willy’s sons dearly and regarded Biff as a hero. Bernard’s success is difficult for Willy to accept because his own sons’ lives do not measure up. |
| **Key Themes** |
| **Disorder and chaos**: Tragedy is often concerned with a breakdown in order, whether it is national, social or domestic. The subsequent disorder and chaos that occurs as a consequence of this breakdown is a key component of tragic narratives. *In Death of a Salesman* Willy’s family is in crisis. | **Ben** | Willy’s wealthy older brother. Ben has recently died and appears only in Willy’s “daydreams.” Willy regards Ben as a symbol of the success that he so desperately craves for himself and his sons. | | Howard Wagner | | Willy’s boss. Howard inherited the company from his father, whom Willy regarded as “a masterful man” and “a prince.” Though much younger than Willy, Howard treats Willy with condescension and eventually fires him, despite Willy’s wounded assertions that he named Howard at his birth. |  |
| **American Dream:** The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideals (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, as well as an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers. | **The Woman** | Willy’s mistress when Happy and Biff were in high school. The Woman’s attention and admiration boost Willy’s fragile ego. When Biff catches Willy in his hotel room with The Woman, he loses faith in his father, and his dream of passing math and going to college dies. | |  | | |
| **Masculinity and Heroism:** Willy is very much caught up in the masculine dream of America and it does not succeed as he wishes. He tries to live up to expectations and prove his popularity and success, yet he is unable to achieve these things in the way he envisages. In many ways, Miller is questioning and shattering the construction of manhood in a similar manner as he does with the American Dream. Whilst Willy fulfils the ‘masculine’ stereotype within the household – he pays for the fridge and is the sole provider etc. –he never really earns himself a respectable place in the community. He believes people laugh at him and that he is ‘not noticed’. Whilst Linda does her best to console and reassure him, her position as female in the text does not lend her the authority, she needs to be able to change his perceptions. Indeed, women are objectified and seen as consumable objects in the play. All the male characters display this attitude to some extent. ‘The Woman’ is not even granted a name, and Happy regularly refers to women as food and games; they are sexual objects that can be used and thus display their masculinity. | **Aspects of Tragedy**  At the core of all the set texts is a **tragic hero or heroine who is flawed in some way, who suffers and causes suffering to others and in all texts there is an interplay between what might be seen as villains and victims** The absence of an ‘aspect’ can be as significant as its presence. There can be no exhaustive list of the ‘aspects’ of tragedy but areas that can usefully be explored include:   * **the type of the tragic text itself, whether it is classical and about public figures, or domestic and about representations of ordinary people,** * **the settings for the tragedy, both places and times** * **the journey towards death of the protagonists, their flaws, pride and folly, their blindness and insight, their discovery and learning, their being a mix of good and evil** * **the role of the tragic villain or opponent, who directly affects the fortune of the hero, who engages in a contest of power and is partly responsible for the hero’s demise** * **the presence of fate, how the hero’s end is inevitable** * **how the behaviour of the hero affects the world around him, creating chaos and affecting the lives of others** * **the significance of violence and revenge, humour and moments of happiness** * **the structural pattern of the text as it moves through complication to catastrophe, from order to disorder, through climax to resolution, from the prosperity and happiness of the hero to the tragic end** * **the use of plots and sub-plots** * **the way that language is used to heighten the tragedy** * **ultimately how the tragedy affects the audience, acting as a commentary on the real world, moving the audience through pity and fear to an understanding of the human condition.** | | | | | |
| **Nature and Physical Pursuits**: the alternative to the corruption of urban capitalism is physical or natural pursuits. Biff talks about working with horses or cattle on ranches as his calling. Happy knows he can ‘outbox, outrun and out-lift anybody in that store’ and Willy ‘was a happy man with a batch of cement’. The ‘Loman Brothers’ would sell sporting goods and Willy should have gone to the wilds of Alaska. The suggestion is that the true nature of all three of these men would be in physical pursuits and in a rural setting. However, Willy’s dependence on ‘the dream’, means they cannot follow their true calling. |
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| **Writer’s Methods** | | **Key Context** | | | |
| **Expressionism**: the artist depicting a version of reality – symbolism, staging, the music and lighting.  **Realism:** Represents middle class life/believable characters. Clearly defined plots, climaxes, resolutions.  **Naturalism:** Writers apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings.  **Theatre of the Absurd:** Biff, Happy and Willy are all portrayed as lost and confused in a hostile world.  **Time Frame:** The play is in 2 Acts and Requiem, creating a unity of time and a sense of continuous action.  **Language:** Characters speak in colloquial, informal prose.  **Mobile concurrency:** Where the past and present are shown on stage (usually done by different coloured lighting). ‘’There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present... because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.” Arthur Miller  **Flashbacks:** Memories are presented as something that haunts Willy and there is a sense, he can control them.  **Stage setting:** The reality of the house walls can be breached by the actors.  **Setting:** The Loman house is described in a lengthy stage direction in the play’s opening. The house seems small, insignificant and vulnerable, symbolic of the character of Willy himself, and hinting at the fragility of domestic life and the family unit. The towering angular shapes surrounding the house also suggest entrapment. The world beyond looms and engulfs the house just as capitalist America overwhelms and consumes Willy.  **Stage directions/lighting:** Miller creates fluency in a lot of the transitions between scenes by blending reality with the past.  **Music:** It dominates the play and dissolves time and space – important in the last few scenes.  **Symbolism** Various symbols throughout the play indicate different meanings e.g. stockings, The Car, the rubber hose. Many of the symbols relate to the growth of American Consumerism.  **Motif-** The Garden, The Jungle, Stockings, Falling/Down, stealing, brand names, diamonds  ‘The **Form** of Death of a Salesman was an attempt…to convey the bending of time…There are two or three sorts of time in that play. One is social time; one is psychic, time the way we remember things; and the third one is the sense of time created by the play and shared by the audience. The play is taking place in the Greek unity of 24 hours; and yet it is dealing with material that goes back probably 25 years.’’ Arthur Miller, 1985  The **Structure of the play:** The **twenty-four hours of present time** show Willy’s mind under stress, suggesting the inevitability of breakdown. The insights into the past show Willy’s shortcomings and tragic denials. **“Requiem”.** Here Miller exploits the tragic element of pathos with Linda crying at the graveside ‘We’re free ...we’re free’. It is here that Willy’s status as tragic victim is most keenly felt. | | **Arthur Miller:** | | Born in New York City in 1915, his career as a playwright began when he was a student at the University of Michigan. His early works won prizes and in 1949 he wrote *DOAS* which won the Pulitzer Prize and transformed Miller into a national sensation. It was described as ‘the great American tragedy’ as it addresses painful conflicts within one family but tackles the larger issues regarding American national values. The dramatic conflict from the play comes from Miller’s own conflicted relationship with his uncle, Manny Newman (also a salesman). Newman imagined a constant competition between Miller and his own son | |
| **The Dysfunctional Family- and familial relationships particularly between fathers and sons.** In the play, each generation has a responsibility to the other that they cannot fulfil. Biff and Happy are shaped by Willy’s sins. In Happy’s case, he is destined to perpetuate Willy’s values and strive for material success, where Biff has been destroyed totally by Willy’s betrayal of the family through the affair and the fact that Willy never discouraged him from stealing. On the other hand, Biff and Happy have the opportunity to save Willy by becoming “successful” in his eyes and supporting him and Linda in their old age. However, they are not able to do this because of the way they have been raised. Biff is attempting to break this cycle of destruction in the family. | **The Salesman and American Consumerism** | | At the time that the play was written Americans were reading a best-selling book called ‘How to win Friends and Influence People’ by Dale Carnegie. Basically, the thrust of the book was to demonstrate how human relations could be exploited for practical gain (*remember Machiavelli’s The Prince?).*  *‘Selling is the only job in the world in which a man is paid exactly what he is worth, and not what someone else thinks he is worth. He should love selling for this reason, and this reason only. He has accepted a man’s job, and it will be entirely due to his own efforts. If he fails, it will be entirely due to his own weaknesses’. Alfred Tack, ‘Sell Better- Live Better’ (1958)* | |
| **Post-war America** | | After WW2, the USA faced domestic tensions and contradictions. The USA became embroiled in a tense cold war with the Soviet Union. There was constant anxiety about Communism, bitter racial conflict and ignored economic and social stratification. A new generation of artists and writers rallied against capitalist success as the basis of social approval. | |
| **Reality and Illusion**: The gap between reality and illusion is blurred in the play -- in the structure, in Willy’s mind and in the minds of the other characters. Willy is a dreamer and dreams of a success that it is not possible for him to achieve. He constantly exaggerates his success: (‘I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928’) and is totally unrealistic about what Biff will be able to achieve too. Willy’s inability to face the truth of his situation, that he is merely ‘a dime a dozen’, rubs off on his sons. Happy exaggerates how successful he is and Biff only realizes in Oliver’s office that he has been lying to himself for years about his position in the company: “I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We’ve been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk.”  Biff is the only one who realizes how this blurring of reality has destroyed them all. His aim becomes to make Willy and the family face the truth which they have been avoiding, the truth of who they are: “The man don’t know who we are!... We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house. “This blurring of reality and illusion is carried through into the structure. | **Domestic tragedy/Modern American Tragedy:**  **The American Dream:** | | 19th century development in which the tragic protagonists are ordinary, middle- or working-class individuals. ‘Death of a Salesman’, with its concerns for a socially inferior protagonist, may be considered a domestic tragedy. It can also be considered a modern tragedy; one where ordinary people are placed in tragic situations – made popular after the First World War.  The phrase ‘the American Dream’ was first used by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. He described the dream as a place where “life should be better and rich and fuller”. Some have translated the dream into materialism. Many argue that aspects of culture such as: poverty, classism, racism and sexism keep the dream elusive for millions of Americans. | |
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