

ANALYSIS

Death of a Salesman (1949)



Arthur Miller

(1915-2005)

“Frederick March was directed to play Willy as a psycho, all but completely out of control, with next to no grip on reality.... [A]s a psychotic, he was predictable in the extreme; more than that, the misconception melted the tension between a man and his society... If he was nuts, he could hardly stand as a comment on anything.”

Arthur Miller
Timebends 315

“Vivid and beautiful writing.”

Ward Morehouse
New York Sun (1949)

“A tremendously affecting work.”

Wolcott Gibbs
The New Yorker (1949)

“So simple, central and terrible that the run of playwrights would neither care nor dare to attempt it.”

Time (1949)

“Arthur Miller is a moralist. His talent is for a kind of humanistic jurisprudence: he sticks to the facts of the case. For this reason his play (*Death of a Salesman*) is clearer than those of other American playwrights with similar insight whose lyric gifts tend to reflect the more elusive and imponderable aspects of the same situation. There is poetry in *Death of a Salesman*—not the poetry of the senses or of the soul, but of ethical conscience. It might have been graven on stone—like tablets of law. *Death of a Salesman* stirs us by its truth, the ineluctability of its evidence and judgement which permits no soft evasion. Though the play’s

environment is one we associate with a grubby realism, its style is like clean accounting on the books of an understanding but severe sage. We cry before it like children being chastised by an occasionally humorous, not unkindly but unswervingly just father.”

Harold Clurman
New Republic
(28 February 1949) 27

“Let’s have no doubts or frets about young Arthur Miller’s drama, *Death of a Salesman*: it is a fine thing, finely done, vastly well delivered. The mere seeing and hearing of it—and the consequent assault and battery it will perpetrate upon your feelings—make for an unforgettable experience. There is more than that there, however: there are the American language, the American scene, the Brooklyn accent, the Bronx cheer, all the muck and melancholy joke of our petty-class life taken, shaken, rearranged, revitalized and somehow rehallowed into the stuff of a compelling, surging quasi-poetry, or a widespread pity, a great-hearted dream.”

Gilbert W. Gabriel
Theatre Arts
(April 1949) 15

“In *Death of a Salesman*... Miller has managed to rise above the ordinary flat lands of moralization and thesis drama. His play is a consummation of virtually everything attempted by that part of the theatre which has specialized in awareness and criticism of social realities. It is a culmination of all efforts since the 1930’s to observe the American scene and trace, as well as evaluate, its effect on character and personal life.... Miller’s achievement lies in successfully bridging the gap between a social situation and human drama. The two elements in *Death of a Salesman* are, indeed, so well fused that the one is the other.... Undoubtedly *Death of a Salesman* is one of the triumphs of the mundane American stage. It moves its audience tremendously, it comes close to their experience or observation, it awakens their consciousness, and it may even rouse them to self-criticism.”

John Gassner
Forum (April 1949) 219-21

“*Death of a Salesman* is a great American tragedy, shattering to the audience, overwhelming in its implications, cutting to the root of the poisonous fruits of the success rule of life.... This is the tragedy of the poor man, not ruthless like the rich man, but sinning against his sons to the same degree. Written with relentless truth, with no eye on curtain lines or sure-fire scenes, Miller’s play hits at the heart of the audience with the dull pain of a sledge hammer.”

Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt
Catholic World
(April 1949) 62-63

“It is the biting truth of Arthur Miller’s insight into the rotten moral base of our selling society that gives the play *Death of a Salesman* its power.... Arthur Miller casts a score of darts—at advertising, credit selling, the family automobile; at the petty larceny and the subversive attitude toward sex characteristic of our time. But his main attack is against the view that a man is a fool if he does not get something—as much as possible—for nothing more than a smile, being a good fellow and having good connections. In the very act of striking a blow at the immorality of our commercial civilization, and the salesman mentality it has engendered, Arthur Miller has raised a shout for the individual and his right to his own soul.”

Albert A. Shea
Canadian Forum
(July 1949) 86-87

“The form of the play (*Death of a Salesman*) is not that of ‘flashback’ technique, though it has been classified as such. It is rather the same technique as that of *Hamlet*: the technique of psychic projection, of hallucination, of the guilty expression of forbidden wishes dramatized.... It is visualized psychoanalytic interpretation woven into reality.... The entire play has the aura of a dream, a wish of prehistoric proportion, its strength lying in its adroit social rationalization, in its superlative disguise of the role of the

younger son Hap.... *Death of a Salesman* is an enduring play. It will be performed over and over for many years, because of its author's masterful exposition of the unconscious motivations in our lives.... It is one of the most concentrated expressions of aggression and pity ever to be put on the stage."

Daniel E. Schneider
Theatre Arts
(October 1949) 18-21

"The 'way out' is not found for its hero, Willy Loman, for the play is an elegy on a life that has failed and has come to its end. It is too late for reformation or for him to take on a new set of values. (Only his son Biff arrives at an understanding of different objectives and a different way of life.) But it is not too late for the spiritual redemption or the burst of heroic determination in defeat which constitutes the essence of the austere art of tragedy.

Willy Loman's story plainly involves a failure of values in the world around him. Willy accepts the denatured ideals of American society—not the values considered the highest but those that were overpublicized in America. He naively succumbs to success-worship, to the belief that a jolly locker-room personality which makes one not only liked but 'well liked' is a substitute for solid accomplishment, and to 'the wrong dream' of material success. At the age of sixty-three, he is faced with the failure of this way of life, as an unwanted employee and a parent disappointed in the sons to whom he has imparted his own values. Insofar as mistaken ideas have deluded Willy Loman, the play is social criticism. But it is more than that. It is a character drama so firmly drawn that many Americans, from all walks of life, have identified themselves or their relatives with Willy and have been moved by his pathos and his very human qualities.

Miller rejected the notion that the common world is 'below tragedy,' and in his essay intended for the published version of *Death of a Salesman* he wrote that 'in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality,' and that the commonest man may take on tragic stature 'to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest,' and that tragedy springs from 'the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.' And by these standards the commonest of men may exhibit man's heroic spirit. Miller believed that his Willy Loman was a character of heroic dimensions and that, for all his pathos, he made *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy rather than a lament.

Both Miller's theory of tragedy and its applicability to the play are subject to debate. Is 'our chosen image of what and who we are' always acceptable, and is it, in Willy's case, worthy of the respect that alone can give us tragic exaltation? Since Miller refused to accept the validity of his hero's factitious view of himself, did the author waste compassion and respect on him? Is it possible to contend that he did. Yet most playgoers were willing to accept *Death of a Salesman* as a tragedy, for Miller supplied his loud-mouthed little man with some magnificence of spirit. Willy fights for his family all his life, carries on a difficult struggle for sale long after he has ceased to be welcome in the market place, and holds on to an impossible dream for his son. If in nothing else, moreover, he is tragically impassioned as a father.

Perhaps it is well to make here an old distinction between high tragedy and bourgeois tragedy—that is, tragedy of commonplace life in commonplace circumstances. Willy may be called a suburban King Lear, with sons instead of daughters breaking his heart. Although obviously devoid of the splendor of Shakespeare's old man, limited as Willy is by a small mind and by unelevated language, he is not conceived in merely pathetic terms.... Willy engages in an intense conflict with his son and dies in order to effectuate his hopes for him, refusing to concede defeat for the ideal of success he has set up for him. Since he makes his sacrifice after discovering his own responsibility for Biff's failure, he ennobles himself' his act is a sort of expiation. Since he kills himself in order to leave the boy his insurance immediately after learning that Biff still loves him, it is also plain that the deluded man's inmost desire has been directed at something greater than a salesman's success; he dies as a father, not as a salesman. This transfiguration of a man who would otherwise have to be dismissed as a cheat and dolt endows him with some of the magnitude we expect to find in tragedy.

The tragic quality of *Death of a Salesman* is more than an academic achievement for the American theatre. In several respects, it represents a culmination of American playwrights' efforts to create a significant American drama. The play carries forward the struggle to create a realistically critical expression of American life, to present the common man as the center of dramatic interest, to find more expressive dramatic forms than the realistic technique permits, and to develop a poetic drama rooted in American speech and manners.

Miller's dramatic approach to the American scene reflects some thirty years of playwriting. Insofar as it exposes the hollowness of materialistic values, *Death of a Salesman* carries on the cultural rebellion staged by the playwrights, novelists, critics, and artists of the nineteen-twenties. Insofar as it relates the fate of a little man who is worn out with the economic struggle to make a home for his family and is discarded by his employer in old age, *Death of a Salesman* continues the social discontent of the theatre of the nineteen-thirties. Willy's story is another variant of the treatment of lower-middle-class life developed by Odets and the Group Theatre as part of [a Communist] analysis of the social system. And the play possesses the tender regard for the average man that American writers have favored when they have gone beyond satirization of the commonplaceness of suburban and small-town life.

Willy's story, however, does not yield the usual realistic chronicle, but is transfigured by the imagination. To tell this tale of a dispossessed and defeated commoner, Miller has retained all the verisimilitude of realistic description. The dialogue is colloquial, the manners are familiar, the background is authentically suburban. But the author has also availed himself of the expressionistic dream or memory sequence that appeared impressively in American drama as early as 1920, when *The Emperor Jones* was produced at the Provincetown Playhouse. He has even used symbolism for expressive purposes, notably in the treatment of Willy's successful brother, Ben, who went into the jungle and came out a wealthy man. Miller has, in short, succeeded in projecting his social realism, his 'humanistic jurisprudence' (as the critic Harold Clurman called it), by imaginative means that tell the story of Willy's errors and failures with dramatic economy and suggestive emphasis. Here, in other words, the expressionistic and realistic styles exist in a fused state.

From this theatrical treatment, finally, emerges a poetic drama not of the first order but rare in the American theatre.... Tennessee Williams was able to develop a poetic drama on the basis of psychological deterioration of sensitive characters who do not belong to the mainstream of American realities. He made drama largely out of private sensibility. Miller's poetic drama is of a different order from all these efforts. It is rooted in everyday reality and employs the general idiom of American speech. It has none of the mystique of O'Neill and none of the formality and generalized rhetoric of [Maxwell] Anderson; it never leaves the actual world, it does not cultivate naivete, and it takes a responsible view of life in our society—and it deals with the men and women who struggle with the everyday reality of the average American rather than with a more or less private world. Miller's poetry of theatre is completely rooted in the world we know. It consists of reality rather than of dreams."

John Gassner, ed.
The Treasury of the Theatre
(Simon and Schuster 1950) 1061-62

Death of a Salesman (1949) treats a [recurrent] theme: the conflict between business ethics and the emotional relationships of a family. The central character, Willy Loman, is a traveling salesman with a home in Brooklyn who covers a New England territory by automobile; the action concentrates on the last two days of his life, although events many years back are filled in through flashbacks. A successful salesman in his youth, Willy has gradually become tired and ineffectual; in spite of the encouragement of his loyal wife Linda, he knows his life has been a failure.

His two sons Biff and Happy are a disappointment; Happy is apparently bogged down for life in a dull and monotonous job, and Biff has turned into a drifter and petty criminal. As the flashbacks are presented they gradually reveal the root of this tragedy: Willy's dogged faith in the magic of salesmanship, his conviction that personality, a glad hand, 'contacts,' a quick smile, and good clothes will bring you everything you want in life. Biff, a champion athlete in high school, was his favorite of the two boys, and

he had ruined his character through pumping him full of this philosophy. 'I never got anywhere,' says Biff, 'because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!'

The climax of the action is a flashback scene in a Boston hotel room where Biff surprises his father in a clandestine meeting with another woman. Shaken and disillusioned, he drifts gradually into a life as a loafer and ne'er-do-well. Other flashbacks present Willy's older brother Ben, an adventurer and self-made man who traveled in all parts of the world and made a fortune several times over. To Willy his brother is a symbol of the success that can come through enterprise and courage. The contrast between Willy and Ben points up an incidental theme of the play: that Willy has been born a generation too late, that in a pioneer age he might have made a fortune as an enterprising frontier merchant. This theme is suggested by Willy's constantly expressed longing for the outdoors, his nostalgia for his old car with an open windshield, and his pathetic efforts to raise vegetables in the dank Brooklyn soil.

Another theme is implicit in the contrast between Biff and his school admirer and hanger-on Bernard, a timid and bookish failure as a boy when Biff is at the height of his triumph as an athlete. When Willy meets Bernard years later he finds that the 'bookworm,' through hard work and application, is now a successful lawyer, living exactly the life that Willy planned for his own sons. As the play ends, Willy, who has finally lost him job, commits suicide, leaving his twenty-thousand dollar insurance policy to give his sons a start toward a new and better life.

In addition to the chronologically intricate flashbacks, the chief technical devices of *Death of a Salesman* are the continual reappearance of Ben, actually only a reverie or hallucination in Willy's mind, and the trick of revealing Willy's inner thoughts through his mumbling to himself. Each of the flashbacks, in fact, is set off by a thought which occurs in Willy's mind and suggests to him some incident or person in the past. This last device, commonly used in motion pictures, is adapted by Miller for the stage through use of an ingenious stage setting in which quick time-changes can be made through lighting different parts of the set."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 404-05

"In his second play, *Death of a Salesman*, Miller abandons surface naturalism, and turns towards his own form of expressionism. Keller has the past gradually forced upon him; for Willy Loman, past and present co-exist in his head. But the balance between real experience and Miller's shaping intelligence is not always kept, so that Loman is not completely realized as a person (...it is the Salesman rather than Willy who remains the dominating image). The woman in the hotel bedroom, for example, is one of the crucial figures in the breakdown of Willy's life—but Miller has never imagined her as a human being deserving attention, and she remains a stock symbol, so that the whole of Willy's relationship with her is conducted on a purely formula level. Again, Uncle Ben is simply a success symbol, the bodiless extension of Willy's subjective mind.

On the other hand, in the scenes in which Willy's false consciousness—and the false consciousness it has produced in his own sons—leads him to a failure of concrete relationships with people who really exist around him, the play is intensely and immediately alive (the weaknesses and strengths of the play are there together in the scene where Willy's sons, who have invited him out to dinner, desert him for a couple of tarts). *Death of a Salesman* is a powerful but uneven play, which reveals a certain amount of unresolved conflict between concept and form."

Albert Hunt
"Realism and Intelligence: Some Notes on Arthur Miller"
Encore VII
(May-June 1960) 12-17, 41

"Willy Loman, a bewildered, well-intentioned, unsuccessful traveling salesman aged 63, is pleased by the return home for a visit of his sons Biff and Happy, but they are upset by his peculiar behavior and hallucinatory conversations with figures of a happier past, and they worry about the effect on Linda, their

compassionate mother, who loves her husband and recognizes that his actions stem from the disparity of his 'massive dreams' and a disappointing reality.

Wanting desperately to be successful and well liked, Willy had fallen victim to the false values of society and cannot cope with his failure or that of Biff, once a high-school football hero, now moody and jobless. Linda persuades Biff to try for a good job to make his father proud, but when, with Happy, he meets his father in the restaurant where they intend to treat him to a celebration dinner, Biff tells the truth about his ill-fated appointment and destroys Willy's hopes. In confusion Willy goes to the washroom and relives the awful time when Biff, desperately needing his help, traveled to Boston, where he discovered him with his mistress.

Realizing his responsibility for Biff's aimlessness and disillusionment, Willy stumbles back to the table, only to find that the boys have deserted him for two chippies. Humiliated and stunned, he returns home, fights with Biff, and then is touched by Biff's tears of concern and love. In a final hallucinatory talk with his brother Ben, a successful self-made man, Willy decides on suicide to provide Biff with insurance money. At the funeral, which none of his business acquaintances attend, a friend points out 'Willy was a salesman...a man...riding on a smile and a shoeshine.... Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory'."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 189-90

"*Death of a Salesman* (1949) not only created the unforgettable figure of the middle-aged salesman, Willy Loman; it penetrated the dark mythology of America. The play revealed the moral ambivalence and inexplicable impact of a major work of art; and though critics may feel that the voice of tragedy was muffled by the pathos in it, there is no doubt that its realistic treatment of such age-worn themes as sex and success became transfigured into an expressionistic statement of deep human resonance."

Ihab Hassan
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1438

"The play is felt by most critics to be a bitter indictment of American values. Willy Loman, a traveling salesman, experiences a profound sense of failure as he discovers signs of aging in himself and takes stock of his accomplishments. The play ends in his suicide. This was Miller's first success on the stage, and it won him the acclaim of critics and audiences alike."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 243

"Each time I go back to *All My Sons*, to *The Crucible*, to *A View from the Bridge*, the faults become more ominous, but in each of these plays there are still scenes that work as effectively as they did when I first saw the play. *Death of a Salesman* is something else again. It does not merely hold its own, it grows with each rereading. Those people who go in for good-better-best labels—I am not one of them—would be wise, when they draw up their list of American plays, to put *Death of a Salesman* very near the top."

Gerald Weales
"Arthur Miller: Man and His Image"
American Drama Since World War II
(Harcourt 1962) 3-17

"Miller followed *All My Sons* with another drama of a man's difficult and guilt-ridden relation to his family and society, *Death of a Salesman*, which in 1949 began one of the longest runs for serious drama in Broadway history. The play not only won the Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, but has also sold well over three million copies in book form, making it possibly America's best-known play.... Throughout his career, but particularly in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller has sought to blend the larger force of tragic drama with the immediate pertinence of social drama.

As social drama, *Death of a Salesman* focuses on Willy Loman as a victim of society, and particularly as a victim of a harsh economic system that first uses and then discards him. As a modern tragedy, on the other hand, *Death of a Salesman* focuses on Willy Loman as a victim of his own inadequate values and ideals. There is, as a result, terror as well as pity in Loman's story, as he struggles and fails to find values that can give his life purpose and dignity and so deliver him from the sense of hollowness that runs even deeper than the sense of betrayal and failure that haunts him."

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1954

"*Death of a Salesman* made Miller's reputation as a great playwright. The play's main character, Willy Loman, has become a classic American character, and the play itself has become a fixture of the American literary canon. For the first time in his career, Miller was able to achieve a balance between his reading of individual character and societal pressures. On the one hand, Loman is the 'low man,' the victim of a culture that values success, that prizes a man for what he can sell, that lauds people for being popular—'well liked,' to use one of Willy's obsessive phrases. On the other hand, Willy realizes that he has not measured up to his own standards. These are agonizing moments in the play when he almost reaches the status of a tragic character, when he sense that a flaw in his character has led to his failure as a businessman. He tries to be relentlessly optimistic in a typically American upbeat way, yet his terrible anger, impatience, and pathetic self-delusions show how easily he can be misled.

In one of the most telling moments, Willy expresses his preference for Swiss cheese, rejecting the 'processed' American cheese his wife offers him. Yet he almost immediately falls to wondering how cheese is processed. It is Willy's terrible fate that he should be distracted—'processed'—by a mass-marketed society that destroys his individuality. His suicide is a recognition of his own collaboration in this destruction. Miller's play hit American society with enormous force, for it was experiencing an explosive consumerism and a shift toward conformism."

Carl Rollyson
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1046-47

"If American drama occupies a precarious position in the university curriculum (especially in English departments), *Death of a Salesman* remains one of our few dramas that has been overwhelmingly valorized, and canonized....[the] American play...most studied at the university level...The play remains...a 'cultural treasure'...I suspect, because within the psycho-drama of the Loman family lies a tragic mixture of pity and fear that stirs primal emotions.... *Death of a Salesman* is classically traditional and, at the same time, it subverts classicism with its surprisingly postmodernist textures. Moreover, the play presents various enabling fables which define 'the myth of the American dream' to such an extent that many students (if not teachers) assume, on an a priori level, that the principles Willy Loman values—initiative, hard work, family, freedom, consumerism, economic salvation, competition, the frontier, and so on—animate American cultural poetics.... It embodies a constellation of conflicting views."

Matthew C. Roudane, ed.
Approaches to Teaching Miller's Death of a Salesman
(MLA 1995) 18, xi

"The conventional 'social' reading of *Death of a Salesman* conceives of Willy Loman as the alienated man, conditioned to seek success within a system that transforms him into 'a commodity which like other commodities will at a certain point be economically discarded.' (Williams, 'Realism' 75). When I used to take this approach to the play with my students, however, they angrily opposed me. Most of them were headed for careers in business, and they agreed with Happy that Willy 'had a good dream.' At first, I saw their reaction as part of the problem: they were benighted victims of the system they defended. But in time I found myself questioning my own tendency to discard their views. Largely as a result of their resistance, I grew uncomfortable with my assumptions about the play and revised my interpretation.

My present approach is to locate *Death of a Salesman* in respect to an important transition in Western society: the transition from industrialism to postindustrialism. This approach has the advantage of focusing on the development not of capitalism but of technology (Bell), a focus that renders certain conventional ideological arguments [Marxism] less relevant. The transition too which I refer has been described as a move from labor and machine power to intellectual and technical power and from a linear, closed model for work and family interactions to an ecological, open network of relations in which boundaries and hierarchies break down.... Miller's play...seems truly to forecast...the shape of the future that lay ahead—a future that has become our present. I suggest to students that part of Miller's greatness as a playwright lay in his intuitive grasp of the direction of his society's evolution.... [However, at the time he wrote this play, Miller was a Marxist.]

What Miller's play records is a case of communication that has begun to be inadequate to a changing social context. Willy Loman is trapped by a communication model that does not allow him to recognize, much less incorporate, feedback.... Willy's cult of personality and his fixation on the Loman name are in keeping with the promotional spirit of this period. He is his own product.... As a consumer, he responds to product packaging and promotion in the same fickle, superficial way. He buys a refrigerator with the biggest ad but then, when it breaks down, derides it for its lack of reputation: 'Whoever heard of a Hastings refrigerator?'... His consumerism is never informed by a knowledge of the product, and his salesmanship is never informed by a knowledge of the consumer.... This early form of salesmanship shares in the pioneering...of preindustrial enterprises.... The increasing difficulty Willy experiences in getting to his destination and in making sales once he gets there dramatize the end of the myth of the businessman as pioneer. Willy's father traveled by covered wagon; the old salesman Singleman by train; Willy, by automobile. By the end of the play the car, too, has been symbolically superseded....

In trying to convince his young boss to give him an office job, Willy chooses a strategy, my students say, that is all wrong. He focuses not on what he can offer but on what he wants.... Willy ends up selling himself out of a job because his plea brings home to his employer...the ineffectiveness of the old-style salesmanship with its reliance on one-way communication.... The family, designed as a retreat from the pressures of the world outside, duplicates the one-way communication patterns of that outer world. Willy appears never to hear his wife and his sons, and they, with the possible exception of Biff, seem neither to receive nor to expect a response to their messages.... Significantly, it is Howard who introduces the single symbol of the new in the play. He is fiddling with a new toy—a tape recorder—when Willy broaches the possibility of an office job.... Bernard is in the field of communication: he is a litigator, and his profession is destined to play a powerful role in the coming information society and to be among the first that use the tape recorder to full advantage....

Biff has blithely succumbed already to Willy's cavalier attitude toward related values, such as stealing and lying.... Biff is thus just as unwilling to accept his father in a new role as a vulnerable individual, desperately in need of friendship...as he is to accept his father in his old role as an authority figure.... I have had the challenge of facing a class that has no sympathy for Biff's final decision to go off, presumably back to the farm for twenty-eight dollars a week, and is more supportive of Happy in his insistence that Willy 'had a good dream'.... If Willy could only have connected with those around him as he did with nature and materials in his free time, he would have emerged in 1949 as the new man rather than the worn-out, tired old one.... Social networking and ecological awareness are hallmarks of the postindustrial society.... [Facebook and treehugging]

Eric Bentley...referred to the play's language as 'bad poetry'...and Harold Bloom also acknowledges the problem when he suggests that the play manages to be great while suffering from 'indifferent or even poor writing' (*Critical Views* 1)... Miller's gift as a dramatist lies not in an ability to write resonant dialogue but in an ability to heighten the language of his age so as to bring into relief its inadequacy.... The play appears to record a stalled moment between past and present without providing a solution for starting the motor again.... Its opening in 1949 produced a sensation, catapulting Miller to fame while making it impossible for him to write anything afterward to equal that early triumph.... His play appears both more flawed and more interesting the farther away we get from it."

Paula Marantz Cohen

"Why Willy is Confused: The Effects of a Paradigm Shift in *Death of a Salesman*"

“The story behind the discourse of the actual text, that skittering alternation of memory and present action that Miller, in *Timebends*, says was suggested in part by the structure of the Brooklyn Bridge.... Traditional readings of *Death of a Salesman* tend to be couched in heavily judgmental and moralistic terms. Willy is scrutinized for his ‘tragic flaw,’ seen as either his sexual transgression or his commitment to a flawed value system of salesmanship. Linda is judged either as a good wife, Willy’s ‘foundation and support,’ or as an unconscious accomplice in Willy’s grandiose self-deceptions. Biff’s kleptomania and grandiosity are redeemed by the self-understanding expressed in the Requiem, while Happy’s shallow and compulsive competitiveness, both in bed and in business, remains unredeemed by any gained insight.... Both Linda and Willy are trapped in a confined system, within which they function as well as they can. The same is true of Biff and Happy, who have become in their turn adult children....

The illumination at the climax is of all the Lomans’ complicity in a family system that is everybody’s fault and nobody’s fault.... [Naturalism] The Lomans’ defenses and rationalizations are culturally determined: the romanticizing of the salesman, the myth of the good wife, the dream of the West.... The crucial dates are 1886, when Willy was born; 1890, when his father abandoned the family; 1913, when Willy started working for Wagner and Co.; 1915 and 1916, the birth years of Biff and Happy; 1932, when Biff played the championship game at Ebbets Field and, later that year, discovered Willy with The Woman in a Boston hotel room; and 1949, the time of the present action....

We can squeeze out four generations here that seem to suggest four stages in the history of American individualism. The wandering flute-maker father seems to represent a pioneer generation of westering, and he lights out for the territory at about the time the frontier closed, in the early 1890s. Ben walked into the African jungle and walked out again, rich, four years later, apparently in the late 1890s, at the height of America’s imperialist and colonialist ventures [Marxist propaganda]. Willy’s dream of salesmanship, as idealized in the figure of Dave Singleman in about 1915, is not so much a rejection of this individualist heritage—he opposite of going to Alaska—as a transformation of it, a dream of the lone wolf (‘a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine’ combined, paradoxically, with affectual ties (being ‘well-liked’). Biff and Happy act out in the 1940s the contradictory and ambivalent strains in the individualistic traditions, acquisitiveness becoming compulsive theft and personal charm becoming compulsive womanizing....

The conflict between a past of vital human relationships and a present of dehumanized greed is spelled out by Willy to Howard in a speech that, however undercut by Willy’s own delusions, expresses a central theme in the play: ‘In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality. You see what I mean? They don’t know me any more’.... Willy’s problem is defined, by himself and perhaps by Miller, as the callousness of his young boss Howard (‘That snotnose’) rather than as a lack of a reasonable pension policy and other job benefits or as the result of forces like economic recession or inflation. History in *Death of a Salesman* has some of the qualities of the Loman family, as a narrow, closed and intensely moralistic system.”

James Hurt
“Family and History in *Death of a Salesman*”
Approaches (1995) 134, 137, 139-40

“The tragic in *Death of a Salesman* acknowledges the affirmation of life, which is not, finally, Aristotelian catharsis or Hegelian synthesis but what Nietzsche calls ‘a joyful participation in tragedy, as an artistic ritual, which denies and transcends the tragic’ (*Birth 7*). In this vision of the tragic, unlike Aristotle’s or Hegel’s, ‘understanding’ does not occur; Willy sacrifices himself for nothing. This principle is endemic to the contemporary tragic mode, which can be seen, as Krieger says, ‘using self-destructive crises to force itself to confront the absurdities of earthly reality.’...

In Linda’s blindness, a final coda to that of Charley, Biff, and Happy, the intensity of Miller’s tragic vision reaches its peak.... Through Miller’s art in *Death of a Salesman* we confront neither the dangers of the success ethic in American business nor the lost self but the critical and tragic notion of the unfindable

self in a condition of anomie, struggling through a narrative structure of differentiation and distance. Contrary to Linda's final assertion, Willy—like the rest of us, who feel it less intensely—is not, nor has he ever been, free; he is in a perpetual crisis of authentication predetermined by a rhetorical ground.”

Stephen Barker
“The Crisis of Authenticity:
Death of a Salesman and the Tragic Muse”
Approaches (1995) 94

“In ‘The Family in Modern Drama,’ Miller observes that twentieth-century audiences already know Realism by heart. Ibsen, he notes, pressed the form close to its ultimate limits.... Miller adds that ‘the perceiving eye knows that many of these allegedly poetic plays are Realism underneath.’ In a given play, surface features may conform to one convention while the pervading spirit essentially aligns with the spirit of yet another.... It is not inconsistent characterization but a more superficial aberration that marks the play, at first glance, as nonrealistic. For example, offstage music permeates the play, the set is a multipurpose ‘unrealistic’ construction, and time constantly violates chronological sequence. These features are not standard realistic techniques.... Realism is well suited to present the unencumbered intimacy of family relations, Miller argues. We don’t ‘perform’ for our family members, at least not to the degree and in kind that we perform for those outside our family circle....

Miller argues that the private domain of Realism may be contrasted to the more public applications of Expressionism, which he argues ‘goes back to Aeschylus.’ Miller calls Expressionism ‘a form of play which manifestly seeks to dramatize the conflict of either social, religious, ethical, or moral forces *per se*, and in their own naked roles.’ Expressionism presents the conflict of forces ‘rather than [the] psychologically realistic human characters’ that discretely occupy those roles.... In Realism ‘actors sit about on chairs and talk about the weather, but in Expressionism they stand on them and shout about the world.’... For Miller, then, when a work strives to explicate the personal actions of private individuals, Expressionism fails and Realism shines.... The moment realistic behavior and psychology disappears from the play all the other appurtenances of Realism vanish too’.... Miller’s theory, interestingly...explains why O’Neill’s ‘nonrealistic’ family plays are less successful than his ‘realistic’ family masterpieces....

The name Loman...harkens back to the title character of the allegorical *Everyman*, which Miller calls a prototypical medieval Expressionist play... The use of metaphor transcends the personal, informal dialogue of family discussion, striving for poetic-lyric elevation that is an attempt at moving beyond the personal realm.... Can we not view Willy’s character as particular (real) while seeing certain of those particulars as universal-archetype? From the weary father-husband to the silently suffering wife-mother to the dopey younger brother-son hungry for attention, the detail provides ‘wonder’ at how universal the particulars really are. It seems that we do wonder at material concretely depicted rather than merely described through metaphor or other abstractions.... Conservative definitions [of Realism] will lead to the conclusion that Miller is not using a Realist strategy, while more flexible approaches will see Miller as advancing Realism to a new level.”

William W. Demastes
“Miller’s Use and Modification of the Realist Tradition”
Approaches (1995) 75-76, 78-81

“The balance between Expressionistic and Realistic moments in *Death of a Salesman* is both its essence and its highest achievement. Through this delicate balance, Miller found a form to dramatize the intermingling of individual psychology and social forces, which is one of his greatest themes.... Since the original Elia Kazan production, many others...have diluted or discarded many of the Expressionistic devices that made the 1949 *Salesman* so startling: the musical motifs, the terrifying orange and red glows, the menacing towers, even the fragile transparent house itself. Such tipping of the scales toward greater Realism is often done deliberately to shift the focus away from Willy Loman. It is done to place greater emphasis on the role of Linda Loman, or on Biff and Happy Loman....

Expressionism as a term entered German usage in 1910 or 1911. Among the many influences on Expressionist drama were the free-verse forms of Walt Whitman, the works of Freud and Jung on the

unconscious mind, and the drama of Heinrich von Kleist and Georg Buchner.... Another strong influence was Goethe's *Faust*, part 2 [1911], which dramatized the search for spiritual fulfillment.... More immediate influences, however, were probably the plays of Frank Wedekind and the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg.... German Expressionists were involved in a political and philosophical movement as well as in an aesthetic revolution. Most were opposed to Realism and Naturalism because they glorified science, which the Expressionists associated with industrialism and technology, tools of the materialist society they sought to change....

Death of a Salesman may be seen as a summation of both the early and late stages of German Expressionism... Until about 1915 the primary emphasis of German Expressionism was on the conflict between older and younger generations and between established conventions and new values as seen from a highly subjective point of view.... Like Miller's early work, such plays were often dramas about families as well as about the individual. As World War I unfolded, Expressionism became more and more pessimistic. German dramatists increasingly abandoned personal concerns in order to warn the public of impending universal catastrophe and to plead for reformation of individuals and society.... Since the goals of Expressionism were idealistic—nothing less than the transformation of individuals and society—it is not surprising that the movement ended in disenchantment....

A number of American playwrights borrowed techniques from the German drama. In *The Emperor Jones* (1921), Eugene O'Neill used sound effects and symbolic scenes to project the racial memories of a modern African American. In *The Hairy Ape* (1922), he again created symbolic scenes, along with distorted, grotesque characters and settings, to suggest the disharmony between Nature and civilization. In Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), the walls close in and the floor spins as Rice presents both a psychological and social study of a brutalized human being: Mr. Zero. In George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's zany dream play *Beggar on Horseback* (1924), an American capitalist has a telephone attached to his chest while his vulgar wife appears with a rocking chair stuck to her bottom. The American Marxist playwright John Howard Lawson [head of the Communist Party in Hollywood] employed crude and garish vaudevillian backdrops, burlesque stereotypes of Jews, African Americans, and city slickers...to depict racial prejudice, jingoism, class warfare, and other social problems in his 1925 drama *Processional*. Elements of Expressionism also appear in the plays of Thornton Wilder and Tennessee Williams....

What Miller learned from the Expressionists was their 'quite marvelous shorthand' for presenting hidden forces. Miller extends Expressionism by applying its techniques to create 'felt' human character at the same time that he is presenting social types. Willy Loman is a salesman. To this degree Miller pays homage to the German allegorical tradition, but Miller employs the techniques of Expressionism to make Willy a particular human being as well. The Lomans are round, not flat, characters. There are people in Miller's plays, not class functions.... In *Death of a Salesman* Miller also solves the most difficult problem faced by the German Expressionists: how to avoid the purely aberrational while using a subjective approach to reveal and comment on objective reality. German Expressionism, particularly in its final stages, tends to be associated in the public mind with aberrant or nightmare visions. Miller's delicately balanced Expressionism allowed him to present a psyche in the process of deterioration, but one that appears to audiences as far more representative than aberrant....

One way to diminish Expressionism's aberrational taint was to employ its techniques to reveal Ibsenesque cause and effect; to reveal, for example, the relationship between past and present actions. German Expressionism was such a message-centered drama that it was usually organized according to idea, theme, or motif rather than on cause-and-effect relations among incidents. In *Death of a Salesman* Miller demonstrates that Expressionism can be employed in the service of cause and effect.... From the opening flute notes to their final reprise, Miller's musical themes express the competing influences in Willy Loman's mind. Once established, the themes need only be sounded to evoke certain time frames, emotions, and values.... The flute is linked to Willy's father, who...made flutes and sold them during the family's early wanderings.... When Ben's idyllic melody plays for the third and final time it is in 'accents of dread,' for Ben reinforces Willy's wrongheaded thought of suicide to bankroll Biff.... The father's and Ben's themes, representing selling (out) and abandonment, are thus in opposition to the small and fine theme of Nature that begins and ends the play.... Biff Loman likes to whistle, thus reinforcing his ties to Nature rather than to the business environment....

By substituting a transparent setting for a bisected head, Miller invited the audience to examine the social context as well as the individual organism.... The transparent lines of the Loman home allow the audience physically to sense the city pressures that are destroying Willy.... Wherever Willy Loman looks are these encroaching buildings... That Willy's kitchen has a table with three chairs instead of four reveals both Linda Loman's unequal status in the family and Willy's obsession with his boys. At the end of act I, Willy goes to his small refrigerator for life-sustaining milk (cf. Brecht's parallel use of milk in *Galileo*). Later, however, we learn that this repository of nourishment, like Willy himself, has broken down.... Linda Loman has no object of her own in her bedroom.... Miller's gas heater glows when Willy thinks of death. The scrim that veils the primping Woman and the screen hiding the restaurant where two women will be seduced suggest Willy Loman's repression of sexuality....

The lighting also functions to instill a sense of irony in the audience.... Productions that omit either the golden pool of light or the glowing gas heater withhold this foreshadowing of Willy's final deed. Similarly, productions that omit the lights on the empty chairs miss the chance to reveal the potency of Willy's fantasies.... Without these sensory clues, audiences may fail to appreciate the desperation of Willy's state.... Miller employs Expressionistic technique when he allows his characters to split into younger versions of themselves to represent Willy's memories. Young Biff's letter sweater and football signal his age reversion, yet they also move in the direction of social type. The Woman also is an Expressionistic type, the play's only generic character other than the marvelously individualized salesman. Miller's greatest Expressionistic creations, however, are Ben and Willy Loman.... Miller acknowledged that he purposely refused to give Ben any character.... Clearly Ben represents a promise to Willy Loman. It is the promise of material success.... Since Miller never discloses the cause of Ben's death, he may be a suicide himself. His idyllic melody...becomes finally a death march....

The Expressionism in *Salesman* is not intrusive. Its very refinement of German Expressionism lies in its subtlety, in its delicate balance with the realistic moments in the drama. This ever-shifting tension between Realism and Expressionism allows us to feel the interpenetration of outer and inner forces within the human psyche. The Expressionistic devices also elevate Willy's suffering, for they place it in the context of the natural order. To excise the Expressionism is to diminish the rich chord that is Miller's drama."

Barbara Lownsberry
"The Woods Are Burning': Expressionism in *Death of a Salesman*"
Approaches (1995) 52-60

"Times and conditions have changed—that is, the *scene* has changed since *Singleman* was a young salesman. Such a scenic reason for the impossibility of success argues against tragedy and for Naturalism. A correlative reason for failure might be that Willy simply is not equipped to succeed in such an environment: like O'Neill's Yank, he finds himself out of his element, whereas *Singleman* and Howard Wagner are like the functional New Yorkers who continually best Yank. This reason as well implies Naturalism rather than tragedy. Linda, curiously, is also a paternalistic influence on Willy. While *Singleman* provides Willy with a model, it is Linda who shapes him to it. When Ben offers him an alternative career, she pushes him to keep the one he already has.... While lacking malevolent intent, she misdirects a hapless Willy as thoroughly as Iago misdirects Othello...If Willy is completely manipulated—by his wife and others, by his society's corrupt dreams, by the forces of his universe—he could never have escaped his doom.... The play's effects are comparable to 'the experience we suffer in contemplating on the highways a run-over and killed dog'....

The Loman house exists within a 'vault of apartment houses'; later we learn that the wooded area around the house has long since been cut down and that the yard is no longer capable of sustaining any sort of vegetation. The house, as Willy tells Linda, will soon itself be barren, since their children are childless... An analysis of Willy's putative intention suggests victimization rather than tragic status. One way of explaining his intention is to say that, like Othello, Willy realizes his affront to higher justice and so takes his life in retribution; few students, though, wish to argue for this depiction of Willy as a traditional tragic figure. Another way of explaining his intention is to say that Willy, old and tired and defeated, simply gives up; such an explanation makes him a pathetic victim of forces beyond his control. A third way of explaining his intention, and of mitigating the pathos of the previous reading, is to say that he

courageously, albeit foolishly, kills himself to better his sons' condition in the world. He wants his boys—especially Biff—to succeed, but his attempt fails if success is measured financially, because the insurance company probably will not pay. But, more significant, even if the insurance company were to pay on the policy, Willy has learned nothing and gains nothing for his boys....

Willy would have Biff and Happy integrated into the very system that destroyed him.... Biff learns through Willy's self-destruction.... Willy's agency can be seen in part as his flawed perspective on life, his belief in the ideal of a back-slapping salesman who can sell anything simply by force of character and who lives in the best of all possible economic systems. Willy increasingly comes to realize not only that he will never be promoted to management but that he has become unable to provide for himself and his wife. A more adequate agency would disallow such failures and would be more resilient in the face of the failures that do occur.... It is fitting that the immediate agency for his suicide is not the rubber hose and the gas but his car, his means of livelihood as a traveling salesman....

The textual analysis provides students with good reasons to argue that Willy is a defenseless victim, even a pathetic one; it also provides good reasons to argue that he is a tragic figure. That is, textual analysis does not resolve, but only sharpens this basic ambiguity of the play....Willy's abdication of self-determination, his failure to realize and respond to changing conditions, warns students against forgetting that they do possess free will and ought not to cede it to other people or things or ideas... In addition to entertainment and aesthetic gratification, *Death of a Salesman* offers its readers practical advice for achieving success in the socioeconomic world."

Martin J. Jacobi
"The Dramatist as Salesman:
A Rhetorical Analysis of Miller's Intentions and Effects"
Approaches (1995) 65-67, 70-72

"Miller believes Willy is based at least partially on his rug-salesman uncle, whose home of boisterous sensuality he envied, as compared with his own.... Willy gradually reveals his past to us, as Miller skillfully interweaves present, past, and fantasy in the play, originally entitled *The Inside of His Head*. Miller has summarized this device: 'There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present.'... Even in that first excursion into Willy's past, we cannot quite separate fact from fantasy, for it is unlikely that Willy's rose-colored memory would accommodate his insecurity.... Younger son of a westward-trekking flute maker, Willy can scarcely recall his parents or a stable home, but his brother Ben, assures him (in a memory scene) that their father earned good money selling the flutes he made. Ben himself represents an American entrepreneurial past, whereas Willy is a middleman, traveling between producer and consumer....

Willy's son Biff pronounces [his] dream wrong, but his son Happy declares it a good dream. In the decades since the first production of *Death of a Salesman*, audiences and readers [mainly Marxist academics] have echoed Biff's verdict, while debate has shifted to the context of Willy's failure.... Would Willy be a deluded dreamer in any society, or is he an inept drummer to the rhythm of capitalism? Although the 1990s bear witness to the bankruptcy of Eastern European socialism, salesmen's dreams under capitalism are scarcely reassuring."

Ruby Cohn
"Oh, God I Hate This Job"
Approaches (1995) 157-59

"One may argue that [Miller's] attempt to reclaim the common man's tragic stature overlooked the ways in which race, gender, and class help construct that common man's identity through the sociosymbolic work of the family and the interaction between unconscious and cultural meanings.... Simply inserting a different kind of protagonist in an Aristotelian structure obscures more than it reveals.... Willy will ultimately, turn himself into a commodity, acting out what Marx called alienation and Lukacs called the reification of human beings under capitalism—that is, the process by which human beings come to be treated like things.... Neither Willy Loman nor most of our white male students benefit...from the nuclear-family myth [Feminist hostility to marriage], though it is far more immediately apparent that women and students of color do not.... Peggy Noonan...compared Ronald Reagan with Willy Loman: 'They say he

was like Willy Loman, going through life on a smile and a shoeshine and telling his sons you've got to be liked. Well, he was Willy without the angst, and he was Ben too'."

Linda Kintz
"The Sociosymbolic Work of Family in *Death of a Salesman*"
Approaches (1995) 103-04, 112

"As years of critical commentary have shown, the play lends itself readily to a generic approach, cued by Miller's own essay 'Tragedy and the Common Man,' or to a social, softly Marxist approach (how responsible is capitalist society for Willy's failure?).... *Death of a Salesman*, despite the dismissive tendencies of critics, is not a realistic play. Its partially transparent set of imaginary wall-lines, its shifts between the present world and the past, and its reliance on a dramatized interior monologue challenge, in both form and spirit, the conventions of realism.... Students may even ask whether Ben existed at all."

June Schlueter
"Re-membering Willy's Past:
Introducing Postmodern Concerns through *Death of a Salesman*"
Approaches (1995) 142-43, 148

"When I begin the course by asking students to name American playwrights, they usually can name only white males.... That the American experience is understood to be the province of the white male is an assumption inextricably linked to a phallogocentric, white-dominated theater system.... *Death of a Salesman* partially prepares the way for the displacement of women in the contemporary plays.... By this point in the course, the students have arrived at the conclusion that to be an American is to be a white male.... Willy's repeated interruption of Linda's speech...anticipates similar silencings of women by men in Mamet's plays [On the contrary, see *Oleanna*, 1992]. I ask the students to consider the possibility that there is something essentially human in Willy's aspirations, something that transcends the contingencies of gender. But the marginalization of all the women in the play suggests that within this dramatic frame, at least, there is not.... The interesting thing about Willy is that his best side is his nurturing one."

Susan Harris Smith
"Contextualizing *Death of a Salesman*"
Approaches (1995) 28, 30-31

"We see everything from Willy's perspective and never from a female point of view.... Linda, along with Willy's mother, further exemplifies the marginalization of women in the play.... Willy is always interrupting Linda, silencing her, rendering her voiceless, against Biff's protest.... Clearly, she is a tough and perceptive woman, but she asserts herself for Willy rather than for herself.... In fact, she is the foundation and support of the Loman home...the ideal wife in postwar America, infinitely supportive of her husband.... Linda understands what has value, what things cost... Although women are exploited in the play, they also provide stability for lost men, and all the Loman men are lost.... Even in the end, the play privileges the male voice as the conveyor of truth."

Jan Balakian
"Beyond the Male Locker Room:
Death of a Salesman from a Feminist Perspective"
Approaches (1995) 115, 119-21, 123

"There is a flaw at the center of *Death of a Salesman*. As we watch Willy Loman pin-wheeling around like a human piñata under Arthur Miller's psychic assault, we must ask ourselves: What is actually going on, here, on this stage? Are we expected to believe that Loman is suffering from psychosis or dementia, or are we instead to conclude that what we are witnessing is an eruption of plain human anguish overwhelming his mind?"

The problem is that if Loman is in fact mentally ill, then that undercuts the play's impact as a social criticism, inasmuch as the causes of dementia do not include bourgeois aspiration or installment plans. If Loman's troubles are of purely emotional rather than physical origin, then we must wonder why it is that his anguish is so greatly amplified compared with that of the characters surrounding him, who exist in similar conditions. Mr. Miller does not provide any satisfactory answer to that question, and in the act of

failing to do so shows his hand: Loman's exaggerated emotional states come to be, because it is necessary that they come to be, for Mr. Miller's purposes. The fact is that Mr. Miller was less interested in Willy Loman than he was in political questions. He worried that there was, in his words, 'too much identification with Willy, too much weeping, and that the play's ironies were being dimmed out by all this empathy.' For Mr. Miller, Willy Loman's soul is a mere macguffin—the vagaries of capitalism were never so cruel to the salesman as his creator.

To the extent that Mr. Miller does try to offer a satisfactory answer to the puzzle of Willy Loman, his conclusions are not very compelling. There is Loman's famous observation that the 'competition is maddening,' and there is Biff's conclusion that his father 'dreamed the wrong dreams,' but neither of these quite does it. Loman himself identifies at least one counterexample, telling the story of an eighty-four-year-old man who discovers that he can use the telephone to extend his effective working life after his ability to haul around a valise has been extinguished—it is this man who dies the titular 'death of a salesman' in his slippers, returning from a sales call, hard at work, and, it seems, well-contented.

As for dreaming the wrong dreams, the facts of the play indicate less that the Lomans have been cursed by bourgeois aspiration than by the lack of accompanying bourgeois virtues: They live beyond their means, they coddle their children both emotionally and economically, they fail to practice thrift or to save adequately for the future, and they lack energy and innovation, to say nothing of discipline. Their next-door neighbors are neither particularly attractive nor admirable, but they are practitioners of certain bourgeois virtues. Of course *Death of a Salesman* is a great play, if in some ways a great play that sometimes makes no sense. To keep in mind its internal contradictions is only to acknowledge that even great works of art fail in some ways.”

Kevin D. Williamson
“Resurrection of a Salesman”
The New Criterion
(June 2012) 37-38

“Miller's master creation, Willie [sic] Loman, however, is, to any Jew, unmistakably a Jew. *Death of a Salesman*, its author, setting and subject, the business and the agony of assimilation, are all Jewish. The play...is only 'universal' as an act of majority appropriation. It is an example of that poetic realism that was the voice of the second-generation American Jewish writers: Miller, Odets, Sidney Kingsley—a struggle between hope, confusion, aspiration and circumstance. Allen Ginsberg summed it up in his poem 'America': “I still haven't told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came over from Russia.”

David Mamet
quoted by Williamson, 39

Michael Hollister (2014)

Death of a Salesman, a play in two acts and a requiem by Arthur Miller, written in 1948 and produced in 1949. Miller won a Pulitzer Prize for the work, which he described as "the tragedy of a man who gave his life, or sold it" in pursuit of the American Dream. After many years on the road as a salesman, Willy Loman is fired from his job, and when Biff admits that he couldn't get a loan to start his new business, Willy commits suicide so that Biff can use the insurance money. Despite Willy's last wishes, his funeral is not well attended. Download Death of a Salesman. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share. SHARE. Facebook Twitter. Home Literature Plays. Death of a Salesman. play by Miller. Written By: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. See Article History. Death of a Salesman is a 1949 play written by Arthur Miller about a failing salesman named Willy Loman. Willy expresses disappointment with his son Biff, who's unable to find a job at the beginning of the play. A series of flashbacks reveals Willy's thoughts of suicide, which his sons dispel by promising to go into business together. After Willy is fired from his job, and when Biff admits that he couldn't get a loan to start his new business, Willy commits suicide so that Biff can use the insurance money. Despite Willy's last wishes, his funeral is not well attended. Download Death o...