

***The Grapes of Wrath* and 24 More Videos**

Activities for High School English Classes

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DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Author: Arthur Miller
Play Title: *Death of a Salesman*
Director: Volker Schlöndorff

Running Time: 135 minutes
Year: 1986
Format: color

Summary

Death of a Salesman, originally a play by Arthur Miller, is about a 63-year-old traveling salesman whose name, Willy Loman (Low-man), fits him; he is a fumbling, small-time peddler with dreams of being a "big shot." His two sons, Hap and Biff, along with his wife Linda, have suffered under Willy's false dreams and inflated vision of himself all their lives.

In the opening scene Biff and Hap are talking in Hap's room in their parents' home in Brooklyn. Biff has been gone for a year, and for the last three months has had no address; we learn later he's been in jail for stealing a suit. In fact, Biff has stolen himself out of every job he's had since high school. Hap has become a philandering fast-talking hustler who woos women and talks big.

Willy has high hopes for his sons, but his dreams have driven him insane. He hallucinates, has delusions about what was said twenty years ago, and keeps asking the question, "What's the answer?" He'll be sitting at the kitchen table, and suddenly he's out on the porch reliving an afternoon 16 years ago when Biff was a sports star and was about to take on the world.

Biff is dumbfounded at his father's loss of mental stability. He comes downstairs to find Willy out in the garden planting seeds at night. When Biff asks his mother what caused his father's condition, she blames the world, the boys, and Willy's job. "He's a human being. A terrible thing is happening to him, so attention must be paid. He's not to fall into his grave like an old dog." She tells the boys that Willy is trying to kill himself in a car crash and with gas.

Biff promises to get a job and help out. Willy goes to his neighbor, Charlie, and borrows \$50 each week so he can pretend he's getting a salary. Biff sets up an appointment with Bill Oliver, a former employer who he believes will stake him for \$10,000. Willy is overjoyed.

The next day Willy is fired from the company and he goes to Charlie for a \$110 loan to pay his life insurance. "I'm worth more dead than alive," he says. He meets Bernard, Charlie's successful son, and Bernard asks about Biff. Willy cries and asks, "Why'd he lie down, Bernard?" Bernard tells Willy about the time Biff went to Boston to find Willy after he'd flunked math and couldn't graduate. Biff came back shattered. "What happened in Boston, Willy?"

Willy runs out to meet his sons for dinner and when Biff tries to tell him that he was ignored by Bill Oliver and that he stole Bill Oliver's fountain pen on impulse, Willy hallucinates again. He's in Boston in a hotel room with a woman, and Biff comes in. Biff calls Willy a phony, and leaves.

When Biff and Hap come home and find Willy out trying to plant the garden in the dark again, Biff says that he and his dad will have it out. Meanwhile Willy is conversing with the ghost of his brother Ben, telling him he's going to kill himself for the \$20,000 policy payoff for Biff's future. Biff brings his dad in the house and tells him he's learned something about himself today. "I'm a dollar-an-hour, Willy!" he screams. "And you're a dime-a-dozen." Willy screams back, and Biff yells, "Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?" Biff hugs his father, kisses him, and goes upstairs, planning to leave in the morning. But Willy, rather than burn the dream, slips out of the house, gets in his car, and kills himself in a car crash.

The final scene is of the family and Charlie at the grave site. "No one das't blame this man," Charlie says. "He had all the wrong dreams," Biff says. "He didn't know who he was." The scene fades as Linda stands over her husband's grave saying, "I paid the last mortgage payment today, Willy. We're free. We're free. We're free."

Death of a Salesman

True or False and Multiple Choice

Mark the true statements with a plus (+) and the false statements with a zero (0).

1. _____ Willy Loman was a man of integrity.
2. _____ Willy Loman wanted to be known as a kind and humble man.
3. _____ Biff's biggest problem was that he flunked math when he was in high school.
4. _____ Linda Loman stuck by her husband because she loved him.
5. _____ Biff's Uncle Ben taught him how to fight fairly and get ahead in life.
6. _____ Willy Loman encouraged his boys to steal and cheat when they were teenagers.
7. _____ Charley gave Willy \$50 a week to keep him quiet about certain business deals.
8. _____ Willy's car accidents were not really accidents at all.
9. _____ At the funeral, Hap said that his father had lived a wasted life.
10. _____ Willy Loman died as he dreamed—the "death of a salesman."

Write the letter of the correct answer on the line provided for each item.

11. _____ Willy Loman sold: (a) silk stockings (b) vending machines (c) insurance (d) tape-recording machines (e) business cards (f) it's never made clear what he sold
12. _____ Willy hallucinates because he: (a) drinks too much (b) is under too much strain (c) can't hold a job (d) can't face reality (e) a and b (f) a and c
13. _____ Biff loses faith in himself when he: (a) loses faith in Willy (b) flunks math (c) gets arrested for stealing (d) runs away from New York (e) none of the above
14. _____ Since Willy's death Hap has decided to: (a) carry on his father's dream (b) set up a casino in Yonkers (c) become a lawyer, like Bernard (d) ask Charley for a loan
15. _____ Willy kills himself because: (a) he can't take any more of the real world (b) he hates and doubts himself (c) he wants to give Biff a \$20,000 start in business (d) all of the above
16. _____ Charley offers Willy a job at his firm because: (a) he is sympathetic to Willy's hopelessness (b) they've been neighbors for years (c) he knows Linda Loman will suffer poverty (d) he knows he'll get paid back (e) a and b (f) a, b, and c (g) a, b, c, and d
17. _____ Biff's hope for a new life began when he: (a) turned himself in (b) reconciled with Bernard (c) freed himself from his father's expectations (d) forgave his selfish brother
18. _____ Willy Loman wanted: (a) land (b) an education (c) an appointment (d) fame



Death of a Salesman

Symbols

In literature, as in life, objects sometimes take on a significance that far outweighs the value of those objects in the marketplace; they become symbols that mean something powerful to the characters in the story. Look over the following list of objects that appear in *Death of a Salesman*. Then explain what each object means symbolically to the character(s) involved.

Fountain pen

Football

Garden seeds

Rubber gas hose

Diamond

Silk stockings



Death of a Salesman

Dialogue

Dialogue in any work of art is “tight”; that is, it doesn’t include a lot of wasted words about someone’s aches and pains, or the condition of the carpeting in the living room, unless such details reveal the personality of the character who’s talking.

On the lines below, create a dialogue between Bernard and Biff in which Bernard asks his childhood hero about the trip to Boston that affected Biff so profoundly. Use a style that is swift and sure, as Arthur Miller did in *Death of a Salesman*. Write the dialogue in such a way that Biff, after 16 years, reveals his change of character now that he can see what has happened to Willy, and what he, himself, has become.

Bernard: _____

Biff: _____

Bernard: _____

Biff: _____

Bernard: _____

Biff: _____

Bernard: _____

Biff: _____

Bernard: _____

Biff: _____

Bernard: _____

You may want to practice your dialogue with a partner, then memorize it, and act out this important conversion in front of the class. If you do act it out, be sure to videotape your performance, if possible, because watching yourself is the quickest way to improve and perfect your acting.



