

# *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

## BY ARTHUR MILLER



Classroom Notes Part I  
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.



# Arthur Miller

- Arthur Miller (1915-2005) was one of greatest 20<sup>th</sup> Century American playwrights.
- Growing up in great depression in Harlem, New York, Miller painted the picture of American working class and had a strong sense of commitment for the poor, average American people.
- Written in a realistic and symbolic vein, Miller's plays provide a critique of the American Dream. For his works, he was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Drama.
- Miller was very critical of America's engagement in warfare and it's surveillance over citizens. His criticism of the same in the play *The Crucible* was the reason behind his trial by **House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)**.
- Do you know any other famous playwright tried by HUAC? Hint: He was German and he claimed he didn't know English...
- Do you know that Miller was married to Hollywood Legend Marilyn Monroe?



# Notable works

- Miller was a versatile man of letters and wrote various stage plays, radio plays, screenplays, works of prose fiction and non-fiction.
- Here are some of the most remembered works by Miller apart from the one under study.
  - *All My Sons* (1947): a play
  - *The Crucible* (1953): a play
  - *After the Fall* (1964): a play
  - *A View from the Bridge* (1955): a play
  - *Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972): a play
  - *The Last Yankee* (1993): a play
  - [Tragedy and the Common Man](#) (1949): an essay
  - *Timebends: A Life* (1995): A poetical autobiography



# Tragedy and the Common Man

- Before plunging into the play, it will help us to read Miller's essay "[Tragedy and the Common Man](#)".
- This essay was published in *The New York Times* in 1949.
- In the essay, Miller ponders on the question as to why we don't have tragedies any more in the modern era.
- He finds the conventional answer stated below too problematic:  
*"the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied."*
- What do you think?



# Noble Birth not Required

- Millers considers “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were”.
- According to him, the audience relate to the noble heroes of the past tragedies at a human level. Had it been otherwise, the suffering of an exceptional hero would not have been empathised by the common audience.
- Miller says, “I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing - his sense of personal dignity.” Such a quality could be possessed by anyone.
- Tragic flaw is not peculiar to people from great houses. It is but the “inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity”. Such a quality can be possessed by anyone.



# Tragedy is not Pessimistic

- Miller counters the popular idea that tragedy is pessimistic or pathetic.
- According to Miller, an unhappy ending does not necessarily make a tragedy pessimistic.
- He says, “it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity”.
- It means that even the loss of life is a price the tragic hero is willing to pay to claim one's whole due as a human being.
- He says, “Tragedy enlightens-and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom.”



# Death of a Salesman

- Now that we discussed Miller's views on tragedy, let's discuss his play *Death of a Salesman*.
- First of all, let's note that the title of the play tells us what the story is about.
- The title suggests that the story deals with 'Death' and that too of 'a salesman'
- Can an ordinary salesman become a tragic hero like Macbeth, Oedipus or Saint Joan?
- Note further that the indefinite article 'a' before salesman tells us that he was just a common salesman, not '**the** salesman'.
- You can watch a movie adaptation of the play [here](#).





# Acts and Characters

- The play is structured in two acts and a requiem.
- What's a requiem? It's a ceremony conducted for the dead. Something like a condolence meeting.
- The principal characters on this play are
  - *Willy Loman: an old American salesman, ambitious and dreamy*
  - *Linda Loman: Willy's wife, a perfect spouse, a good mother*
  - *Biff Loman: Willy's 34 year old elder son, came back recently to house*
  - *Happy Loman: Willy's younger son, philanderer*
  - *Uncle Ben: Willy's distant brother, we see him only through Willy's dreams*
  - *Charley: Willy's friend, helps him out by lending him money once in a while*
  - *Bernard: Charley's son, who becomes more successful than Willy's sons*
  - *The Woman: a mysterious lady Willy had an affair with, Biff knows that*
  - *Howard Wagner: Willy's boss, he means business*



# Willy comes home from work

- Willy Loman, a 63 year old travelling salesman, comes home from his hard day of work.
- His wife, Linda offers him a patient ear and motivates him. It seems Willy is depressed in his job. **Why?**
- It so happens that Willy started his career as a salesman in a company and stayed in his job for more about 30 years. Now old, he has been demoted in his job. In his current position, he only lives on commissions by working as a travelling salesman.
- Linda asks Willy to request his boss Howard to give him a job in their hometown in New York itself.
- Willy agrees.



# The Day-Dreamer Willy

- Willy is so depressed that he has started day-dreaming. That means he could see people that others cannot see.
- He actually talks to his distant brother Ben (**whom no one else can see**) through out the play.
- **The actions in this play take place as much in the present as in the past, which chiefly consists of Willy's dreams and reveries.**
- Uncle Ben in his youth had gone to a jungle in Africa. When he came out of the jungle, he was a rich man.
- **Note here that Uncle Ben, appearing in the dream, is a symbol of American Dream which was of material success. Willy wants to become as rich as Uncle Ben.**



# The Promising Childhood of Biff

- Happy and Biff, the two sons of Willy and Linda notice that their father is talking to himself.
- Their mother tells them that he has been having a lot of car accidents lately and advises them to stay close to home as he needs their support.
- The two brothers agree.
- We also see how their family lived in the past through Willy's hallucinations and flashback.
- In his childhood, Biff was good in sports in his school. Willy was fond of him and knew that one day he would become a star.
- Bernard, the classmate of Biff and the son of Charlie, was a nerd. He used to study a lot and wasn't much of a sports fan.
- Willy was confident that his son Biff will be successful, but Bernard, well, not so much.



# The Grim Present

- Now, let's come back to the present. Bernard, the son of Charlie is a successful lawyer and is about to fight a case in the supreme court.
- Biff is an unemployed youth. He has no prospects and hasn't done much with his life either.
- Happy is employed, but earns meagrely. In Willy's conception, he is also a loser. The two brothers decide to start a business together.
- Willy is excited about it. What does a father want except the success of his own children? By the way, you should also read *All My Children* by Miller.
- Okay, the next day is very important in their lives. Willy will request Howard, his boss, to give him a job in the office instead of his current job as a travelling salesman.
- Biff will take a loan from his former boss Bill Oliver to start his new business. And together, Biff, Happy and Willy will celebrate their success in a restaurant.



# A Day of Bad News

- When Willy demands the anticipated job to Howard, he refuses. Willy is angry. He has spent his youth for the company. He has worked since the time Howard was a small child and his father was a boss. In fact, Willy had named him 'Howard'.
- Willy shouts at him. So, Howard terminates him.
- On the other hand, Biff goes to meet Bill Oliver, his former boss. He waits the whole day outside his office. Finally, goes in and, you know what, steals his pen.
- I mean, who does that?
- In fact, Biff realises that Bill Oliver does not even remember him. Why should he offer him a loan of any kind.
- The three of them meet in the restaurant depressed. Even there, Happy and Biff take off with some women they meet, while Willy is left alone. Sad.



# Willy's Depression

- Willy has reasons to be depressed: a) he was fired from his job, b) his favourite son Biff has no prospects, c) Willy has to pay insurance premiums and house mortgage.
- At this time, it will be useful to remember that he constantly borrows money from his friend Charlie, and gives the same money to his wife as his salary.
- On that day, Charlie's son Bernard asks Willy a question very important to their lives. He asks what happened in Boston 15 years ago when Biff had gone there to visit Willy after a game?
- We will get answer to this question very soon.
- It so happens that since that day, Biff, a confident charming young boy gave up his life altogether and has never recovered since.



# Some Revelation

- At home, Linda scolds Biff and Happy for leaving their father alone in the restaurant.
- But Linda did not know that 15 years ago, Willy was cheating her by having an affair with a woman. Biff had seen his father with the mysterious lady in Boston 15 years ago and had given up his ambition since then.
- So that might be the tragic flaw of Willy, apparently so devoted to his family.
- When Willy returns in the present time, he is hallucinating still. Biff confronts him and tells him that he is a failure and Willy has to accept that his son has no great prospects.
- Biff also violently asserts that Willy too is a failure and his dreams cannot become reality.





# Willy's Insurance

- On that night, Willy is happy now that everything is out in the open. It was disheartening, yet consoling to know that even though his son was a loser, he loved him.
- In order to help his son, Willy does something unpredictable.
- Willy takes his car and crashes it wilfully. He does that to make sure that his sons would get the insurance money after his death.
- If he had no way to support the family alive, he would do that by accepting death itself. By doing so, he made even his death a sales deal.
- In the requiem, Willy's family pays condolences to him and Happy decides to become a salesman and fulfil his father's dreams.



# Questions For You

- Well, what did you think of the plot?
- Do you think Willy was a character strong enough to be called a tragic hero?
- How important are dreams in a person's life?
- Parents' expectation of their children sometime have debilitating effect on them. Do you think Biff was a failure burdened by too many expectations from Willy?



# References

- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem*. Penguin Books. 1998.
- Death of a Salesman 1985. Michael Blachut. *YouTube*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMqiCtq5VLs&t=3518s>
- **Michael Ratcliffe**. Arthur Miller. *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/feb/12/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries>
- Miller, Arthur. “Tragedy and the Common Man”. New York Times.  
<http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-common.html>



When I was 17, I walked into a jungle,  
when I was 21 I got out, and by god, I  
was rich.

...Uncle Ben

