

## Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – *Death of a Salesman*

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Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *Death of a Salesman* in relation to the genre of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

*Death of a Salesman* has many aspects associated with dramatic tragedy, including a flawed hero, a 'fall' into despair and events that arouse pity and fear. However, unlike traditional tragedies, the play tells of the demise of an everyday domestic figure who could represent any man – or any low man. Willy does not 'fall' from a position of 'greatness' like Lear and Othello. There is much ambiguity surrounding Willy's early life as a salesman and although Willy's own version of his life points to some former glory, Miller does not endorse such a view. 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. The story tracks the events leading to the death of Willy Loman, a tired sixty year old travelling salesman who has come to the end of his career. The world in which he operates does not value who he is and he is forced to confront his failures. In the play, through Miller's use of flashbacks and back stories, it is clear Willy's past actions have been ignoble, creating familial tension specifically between himself and his eldest son, Biff. Unlike classical tragedies which deal with national unrest, this play focuses on a domestic breakdown. The settings of the Loman house and Howard's office are key constructs in pointing up Willy's tragedy. 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'.

### Willy the tragic hero?

Miller believed that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were". This is reflected in the character of Willy Loman, his lowly ordinariness reflected by his surname. 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 is an everyman figure (perhaps the very thing that allows audiences to not just sympathise, but to actually empathise with his suffering and decline).

Despite his low status, he has many of the traits which we would associate with classical tragic heroes. Like Lear, he actively collaborates in his own downfall; he has a tragic flaw and never understands the inconsistency of his beliefs. On the one hand he wants to be popular and liked and on the other he encourages competitive and unlawful behaviour. He has that myopia, or blindness, which we expect of tragic heroes. He is self-deluded, believing in dreams which are in fact destructive; he makes mistakes and missteps; and he suffers acutely and causes terrible suffering in his family. In the end he dies, taking his own life having realised something of his own insignificance. Yet for all of his shortcomings, like Othello, it could be said that 'he was great of heart' and Miller's dramatisation of Willy's failure and despair, arouses sadness in the audience. In his passing, somehow the world seems a worse place without him.

## Biff as tragic figure

Biff can also be seen as a tragic hero of sorts. Although he does not receive the same dramatic attention as Willy, he is similarly troubled, haunted by failure, both his own and his father's. Biff never really recovers from discovering his father's affair in the Boston hotel. To Willy and himself, perhaps, Biff is a disappointment; he is unsuccessful in the capitalist world. However, Biff searches for a different kind of success – he wants to give his life meaning by working with his hands; he wants to be free from the pressures of the commercial world. Yet like Willy, Biff is, for the most part, deluded. Although Biff does not share Willy's ultimate fate and although he has a greater understanding of who he is, it could be argued that his fate is so inextricably linked to his father's, that he too is broken. Biff's assessment of Willy – 'He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong' – could equally apply to himself.

## 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. The return of Willy's eldest son, Biff, to the family household exacerbates the stresses on the family, as father and son come into regular conflict, clashing at different points in the play. The strained relationship between the two characters is caused by a number of factors, including Willy's unrealistic expectations of Biff and Willy's myopic (and at times fantastical) view of himself and his past achievements. Crucial also to the breakdown of their relationship is Willy's confusions about his own father, one whom he reveres as an inventor and musician but one who, because of his desertion, has left Willy bereft, feeling 'kind of temporary' about himself. Biff's childhood discovery of Willy's affair with 'The Woman', of course, creates similar confusions in Biff; he loves his father but knows that he is a fake.

## Setting

This is a domestic tragedy and the setting of the Loman house is therefore important. The 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.

## Structure

*In Death of a Salesman* Miller employs two different time frames – real time and remembered time – and these are important in the development of Willy's tragedy. The external plot charts the last twenty four hours of Willy's life, but Miller entwines in these hours events from Willy's past: memories of his father and brother, Biff's failure at school and Willy's extramarital affair. These events suggest why Willy has arrived at a point when only his life insurance makes sense (the 'magnificence of twenty thousand dollars'). 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.

Another structural feature that is significant in terms of the dramatic tragedy is the "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. What Miller suggests is that the world has betrayed Willy, encouraging him to believe in dreams and betterment but refusing ultimately to reward him, reminding him constantly that he is insignificant. Alive Willy cannot pay his mortgage or fix his fridge; dead his family can use his insurance to pay the bills.