Death of a Salesman: Study Guide Answer Key

Author: Arthur Miller
Type of Work: Play
Genre: Tragedy, family drama
Setting: late 1940’s
Characters:
Willy Loman
Linda Loman
Biff Loman
Happy Loman
Charley
Bernard
Ben
The Woman
Howard Wagner
Stanley (waiter)
Ms. Forsythe
Bill Oliver

ACT ONE
1. Why is Willy home? Why is Linda alarmed that he’s home?
   Home because he is tired, was going off the road.
   Linda is alarmed because she thinks he may have got into an accident again.

2. Why is Willy annoyed at Biff? How does he describe Biff? What does this tell us about Willy?
   Willy is annoyed that Biff hasn’t done anything with his life.
   He describes Biff as lazy and then as not lazy.
   This shows us that Willy is losing his grasp on reality, can’t remember the truth or whether it is past/present.

3. How has the neighborhood changed? Why does it matter to the story that his surroundings are no longer the way they used to be?
   The neighborhood is now full of towering apartment buildings that block out the sun so nothing can grow in the yard and the trees have been cut down.
   It matters to the story because it symbolizes how Willy’s life and hope is dying and he feels like he is being smothered by disappointment.

4. How does Linda treat Willy? How do the boys feel about him? Is Biff trying to spite Willy? Why does Biff come home in the spring?
   Linda is very patient, enabling, caring; loves Willy unconditionally.
   Biff (present) is angry with him for being a phony; Biff (past) idolizes him.
   Happy (present & past) idolizes him and is now worried about him.
Biff may be trying to spite Willy because he is angry that his dad cheated. On the other hand, Biff may simply be lost and angry at himself for letting one event ruin his life.

Biff gets restless in the spring and realizes that he hasn’t done anything with his life, so he comes home.

5. Why won’t Happy go out West with Biff, and why won’t Biff stay? Why doesn’t either son get married and settle down?

   Happy won’t go out West because he wants to be a success at home in business. Biff won’t stay because he knows business isn’t for him or because he is angry with Willy.

   Biff won’t settledown because he hasn’t found himself yet. Happy is having fun/getting the attention he never got when he was younger.

6. How does Willy act toward the boys when they are young? How do they act toward him? How does Willy feel about Charley and Bernard?

   Willy idolizes the boys.

   The boys idolize him.

   Willy thinks Charley and Bernard are losers.

7. What does Willy’s reaction to Biff’s theft of the football tell us about Willy? He says the boys look like Adonises. What other clues show that Willy believes in appearances?

   Willy idolizes Biff. He thinks his son can do no wrong and overlooks his thefts.

   Willy always talks about how people look and dress. He believes success is equated to being attractive and well-dressed and he criticizes how Charley and Bernard dress, calling them “not well-liked”.

8. Willy praises and then curses the Chevrolet; he tells Linda that he’s very well liked, and then says that people don’t seem to take to him. What do these inconsistencies tell us about Willy?

   Willy is losing his mind or has told so many lies he no longer knows the truth.

9. “Five hundred gross in Providence” becomes “roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip.” How does Linda take Willy’s stories? What does this reveal about her? Why does Willy make a fuss about Linda’s mending stockings? How is this important to the play?

   Linda plays along with Willy, never challenging his stories.

   This shows she is passive and/or enabling. She cares for Willy and just wants him to be happy.

   Willy makes a fuss over the stockings because he feels guilty.
It is important because it develops character: he cannot afford new ones, and he used to give stockings to his mistress.

10. Why does Charley visit? How does he feel about Willy? How and why do they insult each other?

Charley visits because he is worried about Willy and hears him up.
He knows Willy is a proud man and he wants to help him, though Willy isn’t really willing to take his help.
They insult each other because they know each other really well and can push each other’s buttons. They have a bit of a love-hate relationship.


Ben is Willy’s brother
Ben appears because Willy is thinking about how good things were in the past and how he could have been successful if he went with Ben.
Willy is beginning to think the future is hopeless though he tries to pretend that things will get better.
Willy views the past with rose-colored glasses but also regrets the incident with the woman in Boston.
Willy feels kind of temporary because he never had a male role model/father when he was growing up.

12. What does Linda think is the trouble with Willy’s life? Why is she angry at her sons? Why does she put the rubber hose back after she had taken it? What does this tell about her?

She thinks that Willy is tired, that he should be working in New York rather than travelling, that he worries too much about the wrong things.
She is angry at Biff for going away and not visiting or contacting his father. She is angry at them for not knowing what is going on with Willy (suicide) and not trying to help.
She puts the hose back because she doesn’t want Willy to feel bad.
This, again, show she is passive and an enabler and won’t stand up to Willy.

13. Why is Willy interested when Biff mentions Bill Oliver? Why do they argue? How does Happy try to capture attention?

Willy thinks this may be the turning point for his family. He hopes Biff will enter the business world with the help of Oliver and become the success he (Willy) always wanted to be.
They argue because Biff is not as sure of himself as Willy seems to be or because Willy is disrespecting Linda by not letting her talk. Happy tries to get attention by saying he is getting married.

**ACT TWO**

1. Why is Willy’s mood upbeat at the start of Act Two? What does he expect to happen?

   Willy is upbeat because Biff is going to bill Oliver to get money for a business venture and he is going to Howard to get a job in New York. He is hopeful.

2. Why does Willy tell Howard about Dave Singleman? Describe the dramatic effect when Howard listens to the voices of his family while Willy tries to talk business. Why does Howard tell Willy to drop off his samples and forbid him to go to Boston? Why is this such a blow to Willy?

   Dave Singleman is Willy’s role model. This is who he wants to be. It explains why he holds on to the dream of being a salesman despite being unsuccessful.

   The dramatic effect of the recording machine is to show how Howard doesn’t give Willy any worth at all, and to parallel the voices Willy hears in his head from the past.

   Howard fires Willy and has been meaning to for a while because Willy has nothing to contribute to the business anymore.

   Being a salesman has been Willy’s dream forever. He knows nothing else or isn’t willing to do anything else because that is who he thinks he is.

3. What is Willy’s philosophy? How does Biff as a football hero embody his father’s dreams? Why does Charley say Willy hasn’t grown up?

   Willy’s philosophy is that being well liked makes you successful.

   Football stars are obviously well-like, admired.

   Life is not about being well liked. It is about hard work. Popularity is a childish concept

4. What is Willy’s impression of Bernard when he sees him in his father’s office? Why does Willy exaggerate Biff’s importance? Why does Bernard ask what happened after the game at Ebbets Field?

   Willy is impressed by Bernard’s success – lawyer, going to play tennis with his friends.

   Willy doesn’t want to be “less” than Charley and Bernard. They were “losers” and the Lomans were to be successful, so Willy tries to make Biff seem successful.
Bernard knows that Biff gave up on success, his future, his dreams at the end of that school year, but he does not know why. He knows Biff went to see Willy then came back and burnt his favorite sneakers, but doesn’t know why.

5. Why won’t Willy work for Charley? Why is Willy able to ask Charley for money? How is Charley’s view of what a salesman needs different from Willy’s view?

Willy is too proud to work for Charley. That would mean he had given up on his dream; that he was unable to be successful on his own.

Willy asks for money because he can convince himself that he intends to pay Charley back.

Charley know sales is about selling, working hard, whereas Willy believes it is about appearances and who you know.

6. In the restaurant, how does Happy reflect Willy’s values? Why does Miller have the girls come in? Why does the dinner fail? Why don’t the boys stay?

Happy wants Biff to lie, to put off the truth until it doesn’t matter. He also flirts with the ladies and tries to keep up appearances by making Biff out to be a famous football player.

The girls allow us to see how much like his father Happy is. It also provide a segue into Willy’s memory of the woman.

The dinner fails because Biff tries to tell the truth and Willy falls apart and takes off to the bathroom.

Biff leaves because he is angry at his father and Happy for not listening and Happy leaves because he wants a good time with the girls.

7. How does Biff’s realization that his life is a lie underline the theme of the play? Why does Biff take Bill Oliver’s fountain pen? Why can’t he tell his father what happened with Bill Oliver? Why do Biff and Happy leave Willy at the restaurant?

All of their lives have been a lie based on a dream. The revelation of this brings out an underlying theme that none of them are happy or doing what they are good at.

Biff takes the pen because of stress, impulse, and the need to take a chunk of the business world with him.

He can’t tell his dad because Willy won’t listen and Happy keeps butting in trying to make things sound better. After Willy tells him he was fired and falls apart, Biff cannot make it worse for him.

8. Why did Biff go to Boston? What does he discover when he sees the Woman? Why is it that Biff never went to summer school? Why can’t he believe in his father?

Biff goes to Boston because he failed math, let Willy down, and wants to see if Willy can come fix things before school ends.

He realizes that Willy is having an affair.
Biff feels like his life is a lie and he no longer needs to or wants to please his father. He is running away/angry.

Willy is a phony. He cheated and lied to the family. He is not the wonderful person Biff thought he was.

9. Why does Linda tell the boys, “Get out of here, both of you, and don’t come back!”?

   Linda is angry that the boys left Willy crying, alone at the restaurant when they already knew he was suicidal.

10. Why does Willy keep planting seeds where they’ve never grown before? Why does Willy think Biff will be impressed with his funeral? Why does Ben say that Biff will call Willy a fool?

   Willy is planting seed, hoping for renewal, regrowth, change, new life.
   Willy thinks Biff will be surprised at how many people come to the funeral.
   Biff will see how well like Willy was and how good he truly was at his job.
   Ben knows, and thus Willy knows, that there won’t be a lot of people at the funeral because Willy wasn’t successful. Therefore, there will not be a lot of people at the funeral.

11. Why doesn’t Willy want to see Linda? Why does he think Biff is spiting him? Why does Biff show him the rubber hose? Why does Biff confront Willy and Happy?

   Willy has decided to kill himself and he know if he sees Linda, he may not be able to do it.
   He thinks Biff has thrown his life away because Willy thought he was going to be successful and this is his revenge for the affair.
   Biff wants the truth out. He know the lies are destroying the family.

12. What does Biff do that elates Willy? How does Happy try to attract Willy’s attention? How does Ben influence Willy at this point?

   Biff cries.
   Happy tells Willy he is getting married.
   Ben tells Willy that his suicide is the only way, as the life insurance policy will bring the success Willy never could bring in life.

REQUIEM

What is a requiem? What is the purpose of this final act? To what extent is it successful?

   A mass for to put the soul of a deceased person to rest.
   The final act puts Willy’s soul to rest and shows the audience how the other characters were impacted by his death.
1. Charley says: “No man only needs a little salary.” To what is he referring? What else does a man need?

   He means men want to be successful, to take care of their families. Willy would never be happy making “just enough”.

   A man needs recognition, love, a reputation…

2. Explain the irony of Linda’s last speech.

   Willy worked his whole life for success; only got it in death or paid the house off when there is no one left to live in it. Linda is free from Willy, and Willy is free from the uphill struggle of being a salesman now that he is dead.

Also Know…

1. Explain Miller’s use of Realism and Expressionism throughout the play. What function does combining the two elements serve?

   Realism was an artistic movement that began in 19th century France. The realists sought to accurately portray everyday characters, situations, and dilemmas. Realist drama was a careful observation of human characteristics and the language attempted to be as close as possible to natural conversation. Contemporary costuming and three–dimensional sets were used so as to create a ‘lifelike’ stage picture. The plays were usually critiques of social problems.

   A reaction to Realism, the Expressionist movement began in the early 1900s. Expressionist dramatists were concerned with presenting the inner psychological reality of a character, a subjective vision of the world as opposed to an objective representation as Realism wanted to do. They were, as American Expressionist playwright Elmer Rice claimed, “... getting beneath reality, displaying more than reality, replacing reality with something more expressive.”

   They threw out dramatic convention – plot, structure and characterization were abandoned, dialogue became poetic and lighting was used to create atmosphere.

   Miller was interested in Expressionism but didn’t want to abandon the conventions of realism. He used, like O’Neill, a dramatic form that combined THE SUBJECTIVITY OF EXPRESSIONISM with the ILLUSION OF OBJECTIVITY AFFORDED BY REALISM. “Death of A Salesman” encompasses both realism and expressionism in such a way as to truly represent Willy, his dilemma, and also his state of mind.
Compare and contrast Biff and Happy. How are they similar? How are they different? Is one son more like Willy than the other? How?

Both Biff and Happy are Willy Loman’s sons. Both are dreamers, unhappy, and unsuccessful (Biff doesn’t have his HS diploma, is a drifter who doesn’t make any money. He does not have a home or a car. Happy is the assistant to the assistant buyer of a Dept. store. Ironically, Happy is unhappy—his life has no substance). Both sons steal, Biff steals actual items (football, basketballs, fountain pen) while Happy steals women from other men.

However, Biff is more ethical and empathetic, more like Linda Loman. Biff realizes the truth about himself and Willy, showing psychological maturity by the end of the play. Unlike Happy, Biff finds the competitiveness of the American Dream unappealing, and he would rather work on a ranch and live a simple life.

Happy is more like Willy Loman. He inherits his father’s delusional hopes of being “successful” by being both rich and admired. Happy is unethical, lies to himself and everyone around him, and is apathetic. He shows no psychological or moral maturity/growth.

Some believe that the play is a criticism of capitalism and the American way of life. Discuss your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with them. What are the social implications of the play?

Arthur Miller critiques the American Dream: the competitiveness and materialism that has come to equate to happiness. According the Willy Loman, the American dream is to be both rich and admired, and this is what Miller critique through Willy’s character. American society has become to consumed with materialism and competition with everyone around them that true happiness is distorted by greed and the ego.

Who is Dave Singleman? What does Willy think of him? What does this reveal about Willy?

Dave Singleman represents the "successful" salesman who makes his living with no more than a phone call. He is the epitome of success, a success to which men like Willy would aspire. Dave worked until he was 84 years old and died “the death of a salesman”: working til the moment he died. This reveals that Willy finds the material and social success of Dave Singleman as the key to happiness.
Explain the motifs of the jungle and diamonds. What do each represent/symbolize? Why is this significant?

The diamonds that made Ben rich are a symbol of concrete wealth in Death of a Salesman. Unlike sales in which Willy has nothing tangible to show for his work, the diamonds represent pure, unadulterated material achievement. The diamonds are also seen as a "get-rich-quick" scheme that is the solution to all troubles. When Willy is considering killing himself, he hears Ben telling him that, "the jungle is dark but full of diamonds." The jungle here is a risk (physically and, more interestingly, morally), which has the potential to yield wealth. In deciding to commit suicide, Willy perceives himself going into the dark jungle to get diamonds for his son.