Study Guide

*Death of a Salesman*

Mr. Miller

**ACT ONE**

1. Why is Willy home? Why is Linda alarmed that he’s home?

2. Why is Willy annoyed at Biff? How does he describe Biff? What does this tell us about Willy?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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

11. Who is Ben? Why does Ben appear? What does Willy think about the future? About the past? What

does Ben teach Biff? Why does Willy feel “kind of temporary” about himself and want Ben to stay?

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?

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

capture attention?

**ACT TWO**

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

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?

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?

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?

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?

6. In the restaurant, how does Happy reflect Willy’s values? Why does Miller have the girls come in?

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?

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?

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

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?

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?

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?

**REQUIEM**

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

2. Charley says: “No man only needs a little salary.” To what is he referring? What else does a man

need?

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

**DELVING DEEPER**

1. Is *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy and Willy Loman a tragic hero, or is his death merely the pathetic

demise of a small man?

2. Who is to blame for Willy’s destruction?

3. What is the turning point in Willy’s life? Is Willy the main character in this play or is Biff? Why? What

does Biff discover about himself? How does this discovery affect his relationship with Willy? How is Biff ’s

self-realization dramatic? What is the climax of the play?

4. Does Linda help or hinder Willy in overlooking his small sales and his dishonest attempts to make them

seem bigger? How else does she influence Willy? Discuss Linda’s remark, “Attention—attention must

finally be paid to such a man!” What is the effect of the switch in Linda’s speech to this very formal

statement? Why does Miller use it?

5. What is Willy’s dream? What is he searching for throughout the play? Why doesn’t he find it? Did he

have a chance of fulfilling it? Did he have the wrong dream? Inappropriate attitudes? Is he a born loser, or

does he stand in his own way to success? Explain.

6. Why is Biff so angry about the incident in Boston? Why does Biff steal? Does Biff use Willy’s behavior

as an excuse for his own waywardness?

7. Discuss the significance of Willy’s being a younger son with an absent father. How does that influence

his behavior with his own sons? In what ways does Happy’s situation reflect Willy’s? How has Willy

treated Biff? How is it different from the way he has treated Happy? Why is the athletic trophy in Willy’s

room instead of in Biff’s?

8. What do we know about Linda? What can we guess? Does she know about the Woman in Boston?

What makes you think she does or doesn’t? Describe her relationship with Willy and with her sons. Is her

character the same in reality and in Willy’s memories of her?

9. How does Ben affect Willy? How does he influence the events in the play? What do you think of the

way he has achieved his wealth?

10. Willy is proud of putting up the living-room ceiling and making a cement porch. How is the image of

working with his hands carried through the play? Why, then, doesn’t Willy think highly of being a

carpenter?

11. Why does Miller let us know in the title that Willy’s death is coming? Why doesn’t he make it a

surprise? Is Willy’s death in a car more or less appropriate than a suicide using the rubber hose on the

water heater would be? Why? What harm does Willy’s death do? What good?

12. Trace one of the symbols (stockings, diamonds, etc.) throughout the play and explain why and how

Miller has used it. What other symbols does Miller use and to what purpose?

13. How does the structure of the play mirror Willy’s blurring of illusion and reality?

15. How is Willy’s killing himself for the insurance money symptomatic of the way he has lived? What

legacy does Willy leave his family?

**PLAY QUOTES**

Read the passages and answer the following questions: 1. Who said it? 2. To whom was it said?

3. What was happening in the play? 4. What does it mean?

*1. "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening*

*to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention,*

*attention must be finally paid to such a person."*

*2. "Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eight-four, into twenty or thirty*

*different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved by so many different people?"*

*3. "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away--a man is not a piece of fruit!"*

*4. "Why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out.*

*And by God I was rich."*

*5. "He walked away. I saw him for one minute. I got so mad I could've torn the walls down! How the hell*

*did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him!*

*And then he gave one look and--I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been*

*talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk."*

*6. "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way."*

*7. "I'm getting married, Pop, don't forget it. I'm changing everything. I'm gonna run that department before*

*the year is up. You'll see, Mom."*

*8. "Oh, Ben, that's the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I*

*can pick up and touch in my hand. Not like-like an appointment! This would not be another damned-fool*

*appointment, Ben, and it changes all the aspects. Because he thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites*

*me. But the funeral-- Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts,*

*Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates--that boy will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realized--I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey--I am known, Ben, and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben! He's in for a shock, that boy!"*

*9. "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong."*

*10. "Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman,*

*there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you*

*medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start*

*not smiling back--that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and*

*you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory*.