Character map

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CHARACTER MAP

**Bernard**
Neighbour and friend to Biff and Willy; ends up more successful than them as adults.

**Biff Loman**
Elder son; confused about his place and purpose in life; discovers Willy's affair.

**Linda Loman**
Willy's loving, long-suffering wife; enables his delusions.

**Willy Loman**
The ageing salesman of the title; prone to embroidering the truth; loves his family but is unable to satisfy his own dreams.

**Charley**
Generous neighbour; Willy's only friend; regularly offers support but is knocked back by Willy.

**Ben Loman**
Willy's older brother; idolised by him; made his fortune in Africa.

**Happy Loman**
Younger son; ready to perpetuate Willy's dreams.

**Miss Francis, ‘the woman’**
Secretary of one of Willy's clients.

**Childhood friends**

**Parent relationships**
Father of

**Married to**

**Siblings**

**Had an affair with**

**Son of**

**Father of**

**Neighbours**

**Had an affair with**

**Father of**
OVERVIEW

About the author

Arthur Miller is best known as a first-class dramatist who exposed his nation’s Achilles heels, and as a navigator of America’s national psyche. His greatest work, Death of a Salesman (1949), created its own genre: the American tragedy. American tragedy spotlights the weakest links in the great American Dream, and reminds us of its finest aspirations. Death of a Salesman reveals that most ordinary people are unable to achieve the American Dream, no matter how much they believe in it or how hard they work. Miller’s other great work, The Crucible (1953), reveals the restrictions imposed on individual freedom in ‘the land of the free’. He is a playwright who uncovered the contradictions in his own society while appealing to its core values. He introduced the thinking of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung to dramatic writing in America, stripped bare the illusions of a nation and also married its most famous sweetheart, Marilyn Monroe.

Born on 17 October 1915 into a lower-middle-class Jewish family in Manhattan, New York, Arthur Miller was an unremarkable high school student. He paid his own way through a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Michigan in 1938 and had his first play, The Man Who Had All the Luck, published in 1944; it was extremely well received and he quickly moved on to success as a writer. In 1947, Miller’s first major play success, All My Sons, laid the foundations for his next play, Death of a Salesman, which would cause a national sensation. This was a Pulitzer Prize winner: a play critiquing the social and philosophical failings of capitalism, and the cost of blind faith in the American Dream.

The lead character in Death of a Salesman is Willy Loman, a failing door-to-door salesman coming to the end of his life but doggedly holding on to lost dreams. Willy was modelled on Miller’s own uncle, a man called Manny Newman, who insisted on maintaining the appearance of complete confidence coupled with a point-blank refusal to countenance failure of any kind. The playwright combined these real-life qualities of his uncle (a regular American man) with mythic principles drawn from Ancient Greek theatre. American tragedy explores the great myths that govern a society by examining the lives of its most ordinary citizens.
Before American tragedy, a society’s myths were examined in tragedy through its kings and great heroes. In Ancient Greece, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Cycle* was a trilogy of plays about a king, while *Death of a Salesman* is about a poor door-to-door salesman. The important factor to remember with American tragedy is that the scale of the drama is as large as the Greeks’ but instead of dealing with the lives of gods or kings, the subject matter is everyday people. *Death of a Salesman* is far more than just a tale of a man refusing to let go of his dreams in the face of certain failure; it is a play arguing that hollow materialism has come to replace the great ideals on which America was founded.

Arthur Miller’s other major work, *The Crucible*, continues his mythic and tragic exploration of American values by drawing parallels between the treatment of those accused of witchcraft in the early days of the American colonies in the 1690s and those accused of communism in the 1950s. Again Miller focuses on the lives of ordinary Americans (this time those living in the 1690s in Salem, Massachusetts), and again has a very direct personal connection to the story. Arthur Miller was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956 and asked to name people thought to have been members of the illegal Communist Party. He refused to name anyone and was convicted of contempt of Congress in 1957 (the conviction was reversed by the Supreme Court in 1958). This political witch-hunt, known as ‘McCarthyism’ (after Senator Joseph McCarthy who led the committee) served as the basis for Miller to draw associations in his play with Americans who lived in a time when they were not protected by a bill of rights. Once again Miller used a small-scale personal story as the basis of a drama that tapped right into the consciousness of a whole nation.

**SYNOPSIS**

Willy Loman is a travelling salesman at the end of his career. The beginning of the play sees him returning home to his wife Linda after nearly crashing his car. Biff and Happy, their adult sons, are on a rare trip home. The relationship between Biff and his father is strained. Willy thinks Biff is a ‘lazy bum’ (p.11): he has not found himself a career at the age of thirty-four. Upstairs in their bedroom, Biff talks to his brother,
Happy, about his own inability to settle and his anger at his father’s criticism of him.

Alone in the kitchen, Willy retreats into his memory: remembering the boys as teenagers, imagining Biff being a top-class footballer and reliving conversations with his successful brother, Ben. Within these memories are also hints of where things started to go wrong for Willy – where he exaggerates his success, dismisses Biff’s stealing and lies to his wife. The past and present continue to mingle in Willy’s mind throughout a visit by his friend Charley, who offers him a job, which Willy proudly rejects. During the play, Willy frequently drifts in and out of the present, interacting with characters from his past.

The brothers and Linda discuss Willy – Linda defends him and attacks her sons for their treatment of him. She tells them of her fear that Willy is trying to kill himself. When Willy irritably rejoins them, Biff tries to placate him by saying he will go and see an old employer, Oliver, and ask for a job. This escalates into a plan for the brothers to set up a business together. Willy is delighted and the whole family is drawn into this daydream. At the end of the act, however, Biff finds a length of rubber tubing that Willy has hidden (to use to commit suicide).

The second act opens happily with Willy making plans to ask his boss for a desk job and then meet his sons for dinner. However, Willy’s boss (Howard) will not give him a different job and, instead, tells Willy he is fired. This triggers Willy’s memories of turning down his brother Ben’s offer of a job. Willy then goes to Charley’s office to borrow money and meets Charley’s son Bernard, whom Willy had ridiculed as a boy but who is now a successful lawyer. Charley again offers him a job and Willy is again furious at being ‘insulted’ (p.76).

In the restaurant that evening, Biff tells Happy that Oliver did not remember him, leading him to realise he had been lying to himself about his importance in the company. As Biff left the office he stole a fountain pen. Willy enters and Biff tries to tell him what has happened but Willy won’t listen. Biff and Happy leave Willy alone in the restroom, to go off for the night with two girls from the restaurant. Willy remembers an incident in Boston where Biff was devastated to discover him with a woman. On the boys’ return to the house, Linda is furious, and Willy is
talking to his absent brother Ben about his plan to commit suicide so his family can have the insurance money. Biff and Willy argue again and Biff tells his family that he has lost every job he ever had, through stealing, and that he has been in jail. However, Willy chooses to interpret Biff’s breakdown and moment of tenderness in front of his father as proof that Biff still likes him. Willy decides that if he leaves Biff the money, Biff will be ‘magnificent’ (p.106). As the others go to bed, Willy leaves the house and, offstage, crashes his car.

In the ‘Requiem’ at the graveside, the family react in different ways – Happy is angry; Charley believes that a mismatch of temperament, job and dreams has destroyed Willy; Biff declares that Willy had ‘the wrong dreams’ (p.110). The scene ends with Linda left alone. She laments that Willy has given up at the exact point when they have just made the final payment on the house and are ‘free and clear’ (p.112).

**CHARACTER LIST**

Willy Loman
An ageing travelling salesman.

Linda Loman
Willy’s wife.

Biff Loman
Willy’s elder son.

Harold ‘Happy’ Loman
Willy’s younger son.

Charley
Willy’s neighbour and only friend.

Bernard
Charley’s son, a friend and playmate of Biff’s; looks up to Biff even though Biff takes advantage of him; now a successful lawyer.

Jenny
Charley’s secretary.
Ben
Willy’s older brother; idolised by Willy; recently died in Africa, but Willy regularly interacts with him during the play.

Howard Wagner
Willy’s boss; his father before him was Willy’s boss when Howard was born; often represented by critics as the heartless face of capitalism and progress.

Miss Francis
Also called ‘The Woman’; secretary to one of Willy’s clients in Boston; has an affair with Willy and represents the destruction of Biff’s faith in both Willy and himself.

Letta and Miss Forsythe
Prostitutes in Frank’s Chop House.

Stanley and a Waiter
Waiters in Frank’s Chop House.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical, economic, and social context

The historical context of *Death of a Salesman* is very important. As a social drama, much of the play resonates with and comments on aspects of society at that time. Consider, for example, the economic situation in America in 1949. Following a considerable period of lean times brought on by the Great Depression and then the Second World War, America experienced an unprecedented period of economic growth. The country had been geared up for massive industrial production during the war, and peacetime directed that industrial potential onto the domestic market. For the first time in nearly thirty years there was a surplus of goods, from foodstuffs to electronics to cars, and a good deal of money going around with which to buy them. Large-scale housing (especially construction of urban apartment blocks) and inner-city businesses experienced a boom.

The boom of the late 1940s, however, didn’t bring prosperity to everyone. The massive amount of people buying goods triggered inflation and many normal Americans on moderate wages suddenly found themselves unable to afford a lot of products. Small-scale farmers also experienced difficulties because the American government had embarked on a series of policies designed to encourage mass food production by large corporations. It was a time when big business started to thrive at the expense of the individual operator.

The first workers to be hit hard by this change in the economic situation were the lowest-paid, unskilled workers like field labourers, shop clerks, janitors (cleaners), waiters and salesmen. In the play, Biff has been working as a field labourer for a small-scale farmer and Happy is an assistant to the assistant clerk in a clothing store. Both of these kinds of workers would have experienced a significant reduction in their wages and spending power. At the same time, other members of American society (shareholders, professionals, businessmen, middle management) would have been enjoying the benefits of a massive boost in corporate earnings. The rich started getting richer while the poor started getting poorer – a trend that has continued in America to this day.
Another significant change in the economic situation was an increase in the use of credit, which triggered more inflation. Cash-rich corporations encouraged customers to use credit to buy products at inflated prices that they could not normally afford. People used credit to buy commodity items like cars and houses. There is evidence in *Death of a Salesman* that Willy has relied heavily on credit, as we see the pressures of his repayments restricting his ability to afford basic domestic necessities.

The global political climate was also an important factor. America was in the early stages of the Cold War with their new ideological enemies, the Soviet Union. In order to prove their ideological and economic superiority, American citizens started to feel obliged to exercise their democratic right to freedom and prosperity by diving headfirst into capitalism and materialism. The acquisition of goods and ostentatious demonstrations of affluence moved a notch up the social ladder and was widely deemed to be an act of patriotism. Being rich and owning advanced technology was physical proof that the ‘American Dream’ of freedom and opportunity was morally and materially superior to Communism’s dictum of ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’. Personal and national pride had become fused together and the acquisition of wealth had become an explicit and requisite expression of ‘freedom and liberty’.

Notice also that there are in fact two versions of the great American Dream being alluded to. There is Willy’s, which is distinctively urban – focused on money and materials – and Biff and Ben’s, with a ‘go West, young man’ mythology belonging to the century before. This second dream was founded on adventure, physical endeavour and claiming a birthright – the kinds of values embodied in ‘Western’ movies.

**Author’s historical context**

Arthur Miller’s father, Isidore, had originally owned his own business as a manufacturer of ladieswear but had lost everything during the Great Depression. He went on to life as a shopkeeper and his family experienced a transformation – from being beneficiaries of the new American prosperity to finding themselves low-wage earners in a time when only businesses and shareholders were really doing well. Miller