

Education Pack: Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

Background Information for Teachers

- **About Arthur Miller:** Born in 1915 (110 years since his birth), Miller's works often critique societal norms and explore human frailty. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) won the Pulitzer Prize and is widely regarded as one of the greatest American plays.
 - **Historical Context:** Set in post-WWII America, the play reflects the disillusionment with the American Dream, heightened consumerism, and the fragility of success.
 - **Genre:** *Death of a Salesman* is often considered a modern tragedy, blending realism with expressionist elements.
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Key Themes and Topics

1. **The American Dream:** Willy Loman's belief in superficial success versus deeper fulfillment.
 2. **Family and Relationships:** The strained dynamics between Willy, Linda, Biff, and Happy.
 3. **Identity and Self-Worth:** Willy's psychological decline and Biff's self-discovery.
 4. **Reality vs. Illusion:** Willy's delusions and how they contrast with harsh truths.
 5. **Capitalism and Society:** Critique of materialism and systemic pressures.
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Pre-Show Activities

1. **Contextual Research:**
 - Divide students into groups to research topics: Arthur Miller's biography, the American Dream, post-war American society, and modern tragedy.
 - Present findings through posters or short presentations.
 2. **Exploring the Characters:**
 - Assign groups to explore key characters (Willy, Linda, Biff, Happy, and Ben).
 - Create character profiles with motivations, relationships, and key quotes.
 3. **Theme Investigation:**
 - Set up a carousel where students rotate through stations, each focused on a theme (e.g., the American Dream, family conflict).
 - At each station, students answer questions, annotate quotes, or discuss visual representations.
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Post-Show Activities

- 1. Performance Analysis:**
 - Discuss how staging, lighting, costume, and acting choices brought the text to life.
 - Debate whether the production aligned with or challenged students' interpretations.
 - 2. Re-enactment and Directing:**
 - Students choose a key scene and experiment with staging it differently (e.g., minimalism, expressionism, naturalism).
 - Discuss how choices affect audience perception.
 - 3. Creative Writing:**
 - Write a diary entry from the perspective of Biff or Happy, reflecting on the events of the play.
 - Alternatively, draft a letter Linda might write to Willy after his funeral.
 - 4. Debate the Tragedy:**
 - Organize a class debate: *Is Willy Loman a tragic hero?*
 - Students present arguments based on textual evidence.
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Classroom Resources

- 1. Key Scenes for Analysis:**
 - Willy's confrontation with Biff (Act II).
 - The "flashback" scenes with Ben.
 - Linda's final monologue.
 - 2. Quote Bank:**
 - Provide students with key quotes categorized by theme and character.
 - 3. Worksheets:**
 - Dramatic structure analysis (e.g., exposition, climax, resolution).
 - Comparative analysis with other tragedies (e.g., *Othello*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*).
 - 4. Further Reading:**
 - Arthur Miller's essays, such as "Tragedy and the Common Man."
 - Critical perspectives by prominent scholars.
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Discussion Questions

1. To what extent is Willy Loman a victim of society versus his own choices?
 2. How do Miller's expressionist techniques enhance the narrative?
 3. In what ways does Linda's role challenge or conform to gender expectations of the time?
 4. Does Miller's critique of the American Dream remain relevant today?
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