

Name: _____ Period: _____ Date: _____

Synthesis-Style Prompt: *Death of a Salesman* **Judi Van Erden**

Directions: The following prompt is followed by six texts which address *Death of a Salesman*.

This prompt requires you to synthesize a variety of sources into a well-written and well-supported essay. When you synthesize sources, you refer to them to develop your position; you must also cite them accurately. *Your educated opinion should be central; the sources should support your opinion and your observations. Avoid merely summarizing the sources.*

Remember to attribute both direct and indirect references.

Introduction

The status of *Death of a Salesman* as an important piece of American drama is indisputable. Miller created an iconic character in Willy Loman, at the same time he brought to light many issues in American society. Miller set out to create a character that represented the Everyman—the person who gets up every day and goes to work, ready to support his family. Miller believed that this ability to persevere was truly heroic. At the same time, Loman is a deeply flawed individual; some might even say unlikeable. Why, then, is he such an important character?

Assignment

Read the following sources (including the introductory information) carefully. **Then, in an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources for support, evaluate the significance of *Death of a Salesman* to a body of work representing American Literature.**

Remember that it is also important to make connections beyond these texts, and to pieces of literature and storytelling with which you are familiar.

You may refer to the sources by their titles (Source A, Source B, etc.) or by the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Atkinson)

Source B (Wikipedia)

Source C (University of Delaware)

Source D (Oates)

Source E (Miller)

Source F (Hadomi)

Source A

Atkinson, Brooks. "At the Theatre." *New York Times*
[New York] 11 Feb. 1949. *NYTimes*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.
<<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view *Death of a Salesman*, which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre. ...

It is the story of an aging salesman who has reached the end of his usefulness on the road. There has always been something unsubstantial about his work. But suddenly the unsubstantial aspects of it overwhelm him completely. When he was young, he looked dashing; he enjoyed the comradeship of other people--the humor, the kidding, the business. ...

Writing like a man who understands people, Mr. Miller has no moral precepts to offer and no solutions of the salesman's problems. He is full of pity, but he brings no piety to it. Chronicler of one frowsy corner of the American scene, he evokes a wraith-like tragedy out of it that spins through the many scenes of his play and gradually envelops the audience.

Source B

"Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 02 Mar. 2011. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>>.

The following excerpt was taken from the Wikipedia entry for *Death of a Salesman*.

Style

The play is mostly told from the point of view of the main protagonist, Willy, and it shows previous parts of Willy's life in his time shifts, sometimes during a present day scene. It does this by having a scene begin in the present time, and adding characters onto the stage whom only Willy can see and hear, representing characters and conversations from other times and places. Many dramatic techniques are also used to represent these time shifts. For example, leaves often appear around the current setting (representing the leaves of the two elm trees which were situated next to the house, prior to the development of the apartment blocks). Biff and Happy are dressed in high school football sweaters and are accompanied with the "*gay music of the boys*". The characters will also be allowed to pass through the walls that are only impassable in the present, as told in Miller's stage directions in the opening of ACT 1:

Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken and characters enter or leave a room by stepping 'through' a wall onto the forestage.

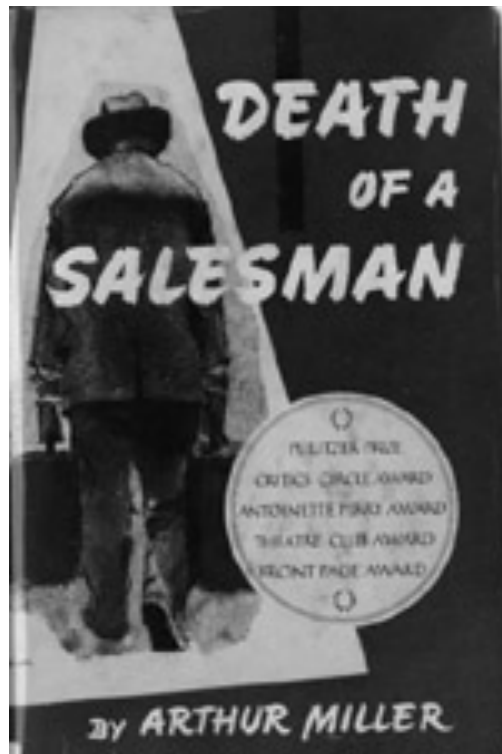
However some of these time shifts/imaginings occur when there are present characters onstage; one example of this is during a conversation between Willy and his neighbor Charley. During the conversation, Willy's brother Ben comes on stage and begins talking to Willy while Charley speaks to Willy. When Willy begins talking to his brother, the other characters do not understand to whom he is talking, and some of them even begin to suspect that he has "lost it". However, at times it breaks away from Willy's point of view and focuses on the other characters: Linda, Biff, and Happy. During these parts of the play, the time and place stay constant without any abrupt flashbacks that usually happen while the play takes Willy's point of view. Willy dies self-deceived.

The play's structure resembles a stream of consciousness account: Willy drifts between his living room, downstage, to the apron and flashbacks of an idyllic past, and also to fantasized conversations with Ben. When we are in the present the characters abide by the rules of the set, entering only through the stage door to the left; however, when we visit Willy's "past" these rules are removed, with characters openly moving through walls. Whereas the term "flashback" as a form of cinematography for these scenes is often heard, Miller himself rather speaks of "mobile concurrences". In fact, flashbacks would show an objective image of the past. Miller's mobile concurrences, however, rather show highly subjective memories. Furthermore, as Willy's mental state deteriorates, the boundaries between past and present are destroyed, and the two start to exist in parallel.

Source C

Death of a Salesman. Digital image. *Univerisity of Delaware Library*. University of Delaware. Web. 28 Feb. 2011. <www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/exhibits/text/miller.htm>.

The following image is from the book jacket from the first printing of the script in book form.



Source D

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman': A Celebration." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Fall 1998.

The following excerpt is from an essay written by author Joyce Carole Oates, celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Death of a Salesman*.

Nearly fifty years after its composition, *Death of a Salesman* strikes us as the most achingly contemporary of our classic American plays. It has proved to have been a brilliant strategy on the part of the thirty-four-year-old playwright to temper his gifts for social realism with the Expressionistic techniques of experimental drama like Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* and *The Hairy Ape*, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, work by Chekhov, the later Ibsen, Strindberg, and Pirandello, for by these methods Willy Loman is raised from the parameters of regionalism and ethnic specificity to the level of the more purely, symbolically "American." Even the claustrophobia of his private familial and sexual obsessions has a universal quality, in the plaintive-poetic language Miller has chosen for him. As we near the twenty-first century, it seems evident that America has become an ever more frantic, self-mesmerized world of salesmanship, image without substance, empty advertising rhetoric, and that peculiar product of our consumer culture "public relations"—a synonym for hypocrisy, deceit, fraud. Where Willy Loman is a salesman, his son Biff is a thief. Yet these are fellow Americans to whom "attention must be paid." Arthur Miller has written the tragedy that illuminates the dark side of American success—which is to say, the dark side of us.

Source E

Miller, Arthur. "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday." *The New York Times Magazine*. April 1950

The following excerpt is from an essay written by Arthur Miller on the first anniversary of the publication of *Death of a Salesman*.

... to me the tragedy of Willy Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices. From those forests of canned goods high up near the sky, he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind, except to stare in to the mirror at a failure.

So what is there to feel on this anniversary? Hope, for I know now that the people want to listen. A little fear that they want to listen so badly. And an old insistence - sometimes difficult to summon, but there none the less - that we will find a way beyond fear of each other, beyond bellicosity, a way into our humanity.

Source F

Hadomi, Leah. "Dramatic Rhythm in *Death of a Salesman*." *Modern Drama* 31.2 (June 1988): p157-174. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 179. Detroit: Gale, 2004. From *Literature Resource Center*.

The following is an excerpt from a critical essay published in the journal *Modern Drama* exploring the generational relationship characters from Willy's generation to those of characters from his sons' generation.

Biff most closely resembles his grandfather in rejecting the constraints imposed by the middle-class routines of holding down a job and making a living, and in his preference for the life of a drifter out West, working as a hired farm-hand in the outdoors. He has a strong touch of the artist and dreamer in his temperament. He is also the most complex character of the three, the most at odds with himself. In this he closely resembles Willy. Like his father, Biff is torn between rural nostalgia and his need for solid achievement, and is tormented by the knowledge of personal failure. "I've always made a point of not wasting my life," he tells Happy, and then confesses to him, "and everytime I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life" (p. 139).

Happy corresponds to Ben...[h]e shares his uncle's unscrupulousness and amorality, but has little of his singleness of purpose....However, some of his traits remind us of Willy, such as his bluster and nursing of injured pride, his insecurity about making good, as well as his philandering.

Charley is Dave Singleman brought down to earth. He has none of Singleman's flamboyance that Willy so rapturously remembers from his younger days. Rather, he is successful salesmanship domesticated. Singleman worked out of a hotel room. Charley maintains an office with a secretary and an accountant. He is stolid but honest and decent, and though not loved like Singleman, he is respected. And, by Willy's own startled admission toward the end, he is Willy Loman's only friend. He is also Willy's perfect foil, a man at peace with what he is and his place in the world.⁵

Excepting Charley, the principal characters of *Death of a Salesman* share the same condition of being torn between the conflicting claims of ideality and actuality; and in this capacity the interrelations among them serve to extend and reinforce the rhythmic articulation of the play on a variety of formal levels. Among the consequences of the inner conflicts and contradictions of Willy Loman and his sons is their uncertainty and confusion concerning their own identities, a circumstance of which each shows himself to be aware at some point in the play. So Biff reveals to his mother, "I just can't take hold, Mom. I can't take hold of some kind of a life" (p. 161); Happy tells Biff, "I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for ... And still, goddamit, I'm lonely" (p. 139); and Willy confesses to Ben, "I still feel--kind of temporary about myself" (p. 159).⁶