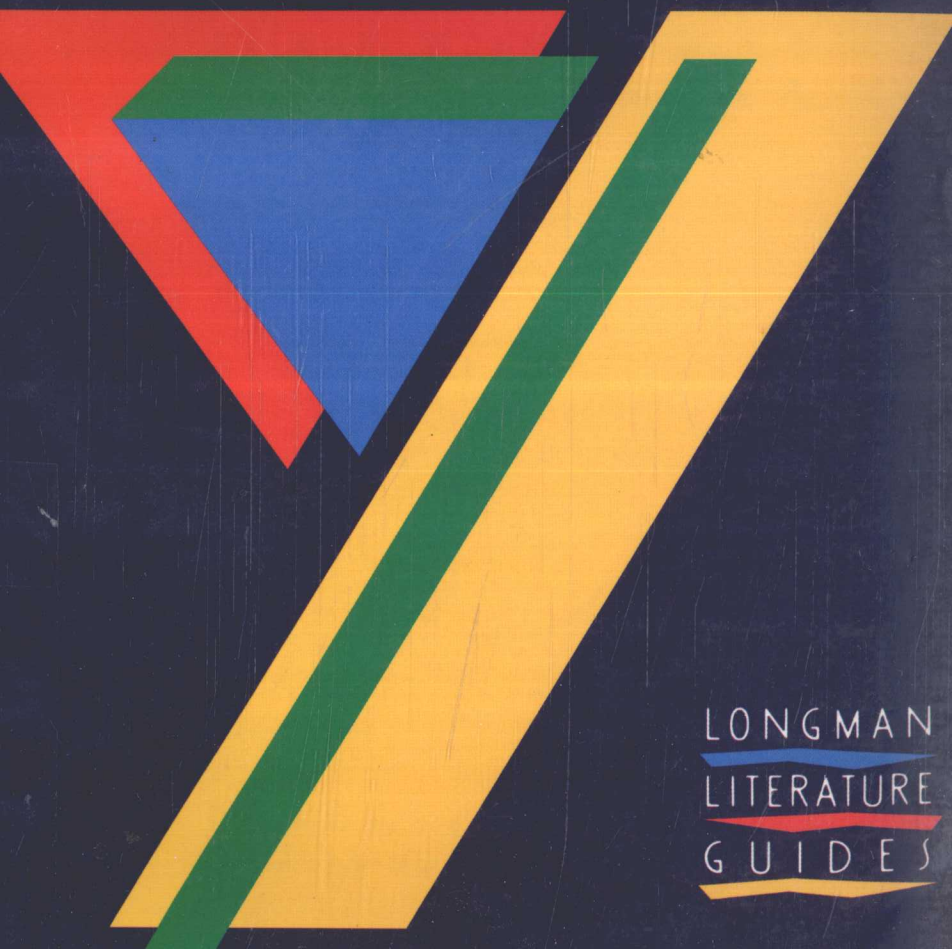


约克文学作品辅导丛书

YORK NOTES ON  
DEATH OF A  
SALESMAN

推销员之死

Arthur Miller



LONGMAN  
LITERATURE  
GUIDES

YORK NOTES

General Editors: Professor A.N. Jeffares (*University of Stirling*) & Professor Suheil Bushrui (*American University of Beirut*)

Arthur Miller

# DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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## 《约克文学作品辅导丛书》介绍

《约克文学作品辅导丛书》(York Notes)系 Longman 集团有限公司(英国)出版。本丛书覆盖了世界各国历代文学名著,原意是辅导英国中学生准备文学课的高级会考或供英国大学生自学参考。因此,它很适合我国高校英语专业学生研读文学作品时参考。

丛书由 A. N. Jeffares 和 S. Bushrui 两位教授任总编。每册的编写者大都是研究有关作家的专家学者,他们又都有在大学讲授文学的经验,比较了解学生理解上的难点。本丛书自问世以来,始终畅销不衰,被使用者普遍认为是英美出版的同类书中质量较高的一种。

丛书每一册都按统一格式对一部作品进行介绍和分析。每一册都有下列五个部分。

① 导言。主要介绍:作者生平,作品产生的社会、历史背景,有关的文学传统或文艺思潮等。

② 内容提要。一般分为两部分:a. 全书的内容概述;b. 每章的内容提要及难词、难句注释,如方言、典故、圣经或文学作品的引语、有关社会文化习俗等。注释恰到好处,对于读懂原作很有帮助。

③ 评论。结合作品的特点,对结构、人物塑造、叙述角度、语言风格、主题思想等进行分析和评论。论述深入浅出,分析力求客观,意在挖掘作品内涵和展示其艺术性。

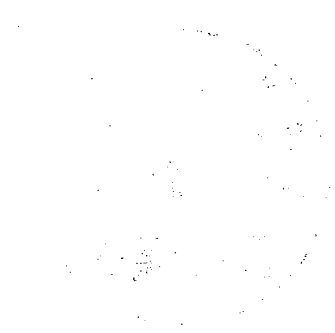
④ 学习提示。提出学习要点、重要引语和思考题(附参考答案或答案要点)。

⑤ 进一步研读指导。介绍该作品的最佳版本;版本中是否有重大改动;列出供进一步研读的参考书目(包括作者传记、研究有关作品的专著和评论文章等)。

总之,丛书既提供必要的背景知识,又注意启发学生思考;既重视在吃透作品的基础上进行分析,又对进一步研究提供具体指导;因此是一套理想的英语文学辅导材料。

北京师范大学外文系教授

钱 瓊



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## Part 1

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# Introduction

## Life of Miller

Arthur Miller was born in New York City, USA, in 1915, the son of a manufacturer and shop-owner. He left High School in the 1930s but was unable to continue his studies at a university because of the economic depression at that time. By working in a warehouse, he had been able to save enough money to enter the University of Michigan to study journalism for one semester only. Later, by working on a newspaper, and by gaining prizes for playwriting, he was able to complete his studies in that university.

He has been married three times, the second marriage being to Marilyn Monroe, the well-known American film actress. His plays include *All my Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953) and *The Price* (1968). He also wrote the script for the film *The Misfits* (1961), in which Marilyn Monroe was the star. *Death of a Salesman* was first produced at the Phoenix Theatre, London, 28 July 1949.

## Miller's theatre and Miller's ideas

Miller uses the techniques of the modern theatre to the full. He is not satisfied with simply employing the devices of lights and sound as an addition to the acting, but indicates in the stage directions of his plays precisely when a particular form of lighting or piece of sound is to be used. This is a deliberate attempt to make the theatre as a whole, not merely the actors, express the messages of the play. Mechanical devices assume, then, a symbolic significance—they represent an essential meaning or idea in the play in physical terms. They express a meaning—hence the term 'expressionist' is often used to describe Miller as a dramatist. This particular element in Miller's work will be dealt with more fully in Part 3, Commentary.

Miller was writing for a middle-class audience. His plays were performed on Broadway, the centre of New York's theatrical and cultural life, and in London's West End. Therefore they reached only a small proportion of the population. Miller uses this fact (that the plays reached only a relatively small proportion of the population) to advantage in *Death of a Salesman*, where he examines American middle-class ideas and beliefs. He was able to place before his audience Willy Loman.

a man who shared many of their ideals, ones which have been summed up by the phrase 'the American Dream'. The American Dream is a combination of beliefs in the unity of the family, the healthiness of competition in society, the need for success and money, and the view that America is the great land in which free opportunity for all exists. Some of these are connected: America seemed at one stage in history to offer alternatives to the European way of life; she seemed to be the New World, vast, having plenty of land and riches for all of its people, all of whom could share in the wealth of the nation. America was a land of opportunity. This belief is still apparent, even in twentieth-century America, with its large urban population, and Miller uses it in his plays, in order to state something significant about American society. In such a land, where all people have a great deal of opportunity, success should come fairly easily, so an unsuccessful man could feel bitter about his failure, excluded as he was from the success around him. To become successful in the American Dream means to believe in competition, to reach the top as quickly as possible by proving oneself better than others. Success is judged by the amount of wealth which can be acquired by an individual. Success is external and visible, shown in material wealth and encouraged. Money and success mean stability; and stability can be seen in the family unit. The family is a guide-line to success. It also provides emotional stability, and a good family shares its hopes and beliefs. These ideas should always be kept in mind when *Death of a Salesman* is considered.

Another point to consider is Miller's conception of what the theatre should do. He is both a psychological and a social dramatist. As a psychological dramatist he studies character, the motives and reasons behind the behaviour of individuals, and presents them to his audiences so that his individual characters become convincingly alive. Often, these people are ordinary, everyday types, but ones whose actions are made significant by the dramatist. For example, the lives of ordinary citizens going about their daily business in their homes may not obviously appear interesting, but the dramatist can indicate that their daily lives *are* important, that they are interesting or unusual as people and that the audience may see their own situations and psychological states reflected in the characters the dramatist has created. *Death of a Salesman* is a good example of this. Of course, all dramatists and novelists try to make the actions of their characters relevant to other people, and most analyse closely the minds of the characters they have created in order to establish what makes them function as individuals. Where Miller differs from many of the others is in the type of person that he has created. Most of his heroes are ordinary people: they do not seem to be different from anyone who can be met in any street; and this, it might be argued, adds force to his plays, since none of the characters are remote

—we share their feelings, and understand their difficulties. Also, Miller is able to show that everyday people can rise above the ordinary when challenged.

Miller is a social dramatist in the sense that *Death of a Salesman* comments on the nature of society. Miller is concerned about society and the values which it holds. This means that Miller has often been regarded as an ally of the American Left, wishing to challenge the values of society, showing those values as worthless, and suggesting that a change may be necessary. Drama can expose the ills of society, make people aware that there is something wrong with the system. Linked with Miller's attitude to society is his treatment of the middle class in the play. He was writing for the middle class as well as about them. And, at the time he was writing *Death of a Salesman* the ideals and way of life of the middle class in America were declining. People were not as stable financially because of the depression and then the 1939–45 War, and so their way of life seemed to be challenged.

## A note on the text

*Death of a Salesman* was first published in the United States by Viking Press, New York, 1949, and in the United Kingdom by Cresset Press, London, 1949. Miller has made no changes in the play. He has written about this play (and his other plays) in the Introduction to his *Collected Plays*, Viking Press, New York, 1957. The text cited in these Notes is that published by Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, which is easily accessible.

## Part 2

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# Summaries

of DEATH OF A SALESMAN

### A general summary

Willy Loman is a salesman: he has two sons, Happy and Biff, and a wife named Linda. He has been a salesman for over thirty years; there is evidence at the beginning of the play that he is tired of his work and that he is not a very successful salesman anyway. He has difficulties with his finances and he is worried about the future of his sons. In particular, he is concerned about Biff, who has not settled down to a regular occupation. Biff is his favourite, and has been so ever since childhood when he was a good and regular football player. Biff's job as a farmhand seems degrading to Willy, who thinks Biff should have 'found himself' at thirty-four years of age. He still dreams of a great future for Biff. Happy and Biff are concerned about Willy, as he has been behaving oddly recently. Biff believes that he should return to city life.

Miller uses 'flashbacks', the recurrence of memories in Willy's mind, to explain the present through events in the past. For example, when Happy and Biff were young, they were content, and loved Willy: Biff was a good sportsman, but in danger of failing a math (American for mathematics) examination, which would spoil his chances of entry into the university. He does, in fact, fail, and refuses to retake the examination. Willy's concern for his sons and his family is connected with the fact that he cannot earn enough money to run his home in the way he would like—he cannot give the boys anything. He wishes he had been adventurous in his youth like his brother Ben, who went to Africa and made a fortune; in Willy's mind he is a model for Happy and Biff to copy. Biff, however, comes to realise that he cannot do this, and consequently is continually angry with Willy for trying to push him into success. He does, however, agree to go and see Bill Oliver, a man for whom he used to work, to try to get a job. This is after Linda has revealed that Willy has been contemplating killing himself by gas.

The interview for this job never takes place, despite the family's hopes, and the celebration in the restaurant is a failure. Happy and Biff cannot tell the real news to their father, especially as Willy himself has just lost his job. Willy dreams of what might have been if he had gone to Alaska, as Ben had apparently once suggested, but tries to draw some consolation from Biff's 'interview' which he believes took place. In vain Biff tries to make him see that he probably will not get the job.

Willy has had an affair with a woman in the past, which explains Biff's changed attitude to his work, and to Willy, whom he sees as false; in his words he sees his father as 'a fake'. In his anger, he tells Willy exactly how he feels about the Loman family's fake existence, revealing at the same time that he knows his father has been contemplating suicide. He does not know, however, that Willy is determined to kill himself in order to let Biff have his life assurance. He crashes the car, and dies, leaving his wife and sons talking over his grave.

## Detailed summaries

In this and the following sections, page numbers in the text are referred to: the edition used throughout is the one published by Penguin Books (1961).

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### Act one

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At the opening of the play, Willy is seen returning from work: he is a salesman and has to travel around selling his firm's goods. In fact, he is home early from work and Linda worries that something has happened to him. Willy assures her that he is all right, but that he did have some trouble with the car; not mechanical trouble as such, but something seemed to happen to him on the journey. Linda tries to calm him, saying that he is merely over-tired. Willy reveals that he has been day-dreaming:

WILLY: I was driving alone, you understand? And I was fine. I was even observing the scenery. You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life. But its so beautiful up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air breathe all over me. And all of a sudden I'm going off the road: I'm tellin' ya, I absolutely forget I was driving. If I'd've gone the other way over the white line I might've killed somebody. So I went on again—and five minutes later I'm dreamin' again.  
(p.9)

He is worried that his lack of concentration may lead to a fatal accident.

Linda wants Willy to transfer his job to New York, but Willy is determined to stay in New England, the area he has been working in for many years.

Linda realises that Willy is too old: 'You're sixty years old. They can't expect you to keep travelling every week' (p.10). Willy reveals that he believes in his own worth: he could have been in charge if things had gone his way.

Willy asks about his sons Happy and Biff who have been out on dates and are now asleep. He has angered Biff about money, since he feels Biff should be earning much more than he actually is. Biff has been upset by the criticism. Willy does not like Biff working as a farm-hand, an occupation which he sees as degrading:

How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week! (p.11)

Willy is angered by Biff who still does not know what he wants to do at the age of thirty-four. Linda is more sympathetic, saying that Biff is lost, but Willy rejects this: America is the greatest country in the world, so a man should not get lost. He could, according to Willy, become a good salesman, because, in Willy's eyes, he has all the qualities for success. He had been popular in school and has the right sort of personality. Willy now dreams of life in the past with open air and trees and plenty of room in contrast to the city life which they now lead:-

The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them? (p.12)

He is angered by this more than he is by Biff and he soon reveals his true affection for his son, thinking he should allow Biff after all to make up his own mind. He has confidence in him, revealing that he would 'put his money' on Biff; in other words, he believes that Biff will be successful some day. He remembers the happy days of Biff's youth, and the joy he used to gain from simple things, such as seeing Biff polishing the car. Willy now goes to rest.

The scene moves to the bedroom of Happy and Biff. They are discussing the situation between them. Both are concerned about the possibility that Willy may smash the car: Happy says that he has been driving very erratically lately, and has noticed some oddities:

HAPPY: He just doesn't keep his mind on it. I drove into the city with him last week.

He stops at a green light and then it turns red and he goes.  
(p.14)

As the play progresses, we observe the decline in Willy's mental state.

The subject now changes as the two discuss their past girl friends, but Happy also uses this as an excuse to ask about Biff's 'confidence' as he

puts it, by which he means Biff's former self-confidence. Biff says that he believes Willy mocks him all the time. Happy points out to Biff that he has noticed Willy worrying over Biff and the fact that he has not yet settled to any occupation. Biff agrees with this to some extent saying that he is not sure of what he wants. He sometimes wants success in the city, and sometimes doesn't:

To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still—that's how you build a future. (p.16)

He is also confused in that he likes farming, yet sometimes he feels he doesn't:

And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not getting anywhere. What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be making my future. (pp.16-17)

Whereas Biff feels that he is wasting his life, Happy seems quite different. He could be a success, but he is lonely, even though he seems to have everything. He is attracted by Biff's suggestion that they should go 'out West', into the country, and work on a farm, but he has to admit that he wants to join others in management: he is proud, believing in himself and believing that he can make it too:

I got to show some of those pompous self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade. I want to walk into a store the way he walks in. Then I'll go with you, Biff. We'll be together yet. I swear. (p.18)

The conversation moves back to the girl friends; Happy is content to chase women, and pleased that he can take out someone already engaged, particularly if the fiancé is a person above him on the success ladder. He does this in the same way in which he takes bribes: he cannot explain his motives:

I don't know what gets into me, may be I just have an over-developed sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her, and furthermore I can't get rid of her. And he's the third executive I've done that to . . . Like I'm not supposed to take bribes. Manufacturers offer me a hundred dollar bill now and then to throw an order their way. You know how honest I am, but it's like this girl, see. (p.19)

Biff changes the subject: he has an idea of seeing Bill Oliver, an old

friend who apparently once promised Biff help. Biff needs money to buy a ranch, but he appears to have been sacked from his job with Oliver formerly, for stealing. Willy's voice from below is heard: it is plain from his remarks that he is still thinking in the past, for he is asking Biff if he is 'gonna wash his engine' and tells him 'Don't get your sweater dirty Biff'. This angers Biff, especially as he knows that his mother can hear Willy.

The scene moves back to Willy; he is imagining scenes from the past (and remains in this state of mind up to page 31). He is warning Biff against involvement with girls, while he is pleased with Biff's work on the car:

Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that's all. Don't make any promises. No promises of any kind. Because a girl, y'know, they always believe what you tell 'em, and you're very young . . .

I been wondering why you polish the car so careful. Ha! Don't leave the hubcaps, boys. Get the chamois to the hubcaps. Happy, use a newspaper on the windows, it's the easiest thing. Show him how to do it Biff. (p.21)

He thinks of the country life and the open air. This leads to the entry of Young Biff and Young Happy. While this is still part of Willy's imagination at this point, the characters are brought out on stage to show what the Loman family used to be like. Willy remembers how he used to return from a business trip with presents for the boys, especially sporting gifts. He encouraged Biff in his football practice. Both boys reveal that they have missed Willy, while he promises them that one day he will have his own business and be 'bigger than Uncle Charley' (p.23), since Charley is 'not liked'. He tells the boys about his trip to Providence, a town in the north, and Waterbury and Boston, towns in the East. He says he will take the boys with him as he is known and respected throughout his area:

I'll show you the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing boys: I have friends. (p.24)

Biff is in a football game; Willy is very involved with this, and urges Biff on. Biff promises that this game is for Willy.

Bernard enters; he is seen by the Lomans as a figure of fun since he is a studious type. Bernard is worried that Biff may 'flunk' (fail) his math examination. He warns him that he has heard 'that if you don't start studyin' math he's gonna flunk you, and you won't graduate' (p.25). Biff and Willy seem unconcerned about this, and Bernard is dismissed



as an 'anaemic'. Willy does not believe that Biff could fail. Although Bernard is good in school, Willy thinks he will be a failure in life because of his small physique and his lack of 'personal interest':

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because a man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. (p.25)

Linda now enters, and greets Willy; the children leave. She asks about Willy's sales and he exaggerates the amount at first, afterwards telling the truth. Linda works out the wages he has earned, and it comes to seventy dollars, apparently a good wage. The house finances have to be worked out. Money is owed on the refrigerator, the washing machine and the vacuum cleaner. There are also some house repairs. Altogether, a hundred and twenty dollars are owed.

Willy becomes depressed about business and reveals that people don't seem to 'take' to him, that they don't notice him or even laugh at him. Linda assures him of her admiration. At this point the laughter of a woman is heard: she is 'present' on stage, but unseen by the other characters; again, she is a voice from the past in Willy's mind. She is the woman whom we see later in the play, again in a crucial scene from Willy's past. As Miller informs us in a stage direction, the action continues through her presence: 'he talks through the WOMAN'S subsiding laughter'(p.29). It is a mocking laughter.

Willy goes on to explain his feelings of loneliness and his love for Linda; he worries about providing for his family. Willy's conversation blends into one with the Woman, who in turn assures Willy of her admiration for him. There has been some close relationship with this Woman in the past:

WILLY: . . . Will you come up again?

THE WOMAN: Sure thing. You do make me laugh. It's good for me. (*She squeezes his arm, kisses him*). And I think you're a wonderful man.

WILLY: You picked me, heh?

THE WOMAN: Sure. Because you're so sweet. And such a kidder.

WILLY: Well I'll see you the next time I'm in Boston.

THE WOMAN: I'll put you right through to the buyers. (p.30)

It is obvious that he has a lot of fun with her, and promises to keep up the relationship. Her laughter then blends with Linda's, as though the Woman has been part of Willy's conscience at that time in the past.

Bernard re-appears to remind Willy that Biff could fail his exam, and Willy suggests that he should help Biff in the exam (by cheating), but