

Contexts of *Death of a Salesman*

THE CONTEXT OF THE PLAYWRIGHT

- Arthur Miller was born in New York in October 1915 into a Jewish Polish family.
- In 1929, during the Depression, his father's business was ruined and the family moved to a house in Brooklyn, which is thought to be the model for the Loman's house in *Death of a Salesman*.
- After a youth spent playing football and working in a car warehouse to raise the funds, Miller attended the University of Michigan, graduating in English in 1938. During his time at University, he was awarded a prize for playwriting, along with Tennessee Williams.
- He returned to New York and began a career writing for radio.
- He married his college sweetheart in 1940 and they had two children.
- He was exempt from being drafted into the US Army because of an injury.
- He married Marilyn Monroe in 1956, but they were divorced in 1961.
- In 1957, he was brought before the House Committee on Un-American activities and called upon to explain his Communist tendencies. He was convicted of contempt for refusing to name names.
- In 1962, he remarried.
- Arthur Miller died in February 2005.

THE MAJOR PLAYS

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| <i>All My Sons</i> | 1947 | About a family coping with having a son listed as missing in action during WWII. | New York Drama Critics Circle Award |
| <i>Death of a Salesman</i> | 1949 | An examination of American life and consumerism | Drama Critics Circle Award; Pulitzer Prize |
| <i>The Crucible</i> | 1953 | About witch-hunts in colonial Salem, it implied a parallel with the McCarthy trials | Tony Award |
| <i>A View From the Bridge</i> | 1955 | The self discovery and fall of a Brooklyn dock worker questioning US immigration laws | |
| <i>After the Fall</i> | 1964 | About an unhappy marriage | |

Find out about:

- The Depression
- The Wall Street Crash
- The American Dream

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CONTEXT - THE AMERICAN DREAM

- The idea of the American Dream is that, through a combination of hard work, courage and determination, prosperity can be achieved. These values came to America with the early settlers and were passed on to later generations.
- In the later half of the 19th Century, there was a distinct possibility of coming across a fortune through relatively little effort, as long as you were able to invest in land. Many early prospectors bought cheap land west of the Rockies in the hope of finding deposits of gold. The American Dream was a driving force in the Gold Rush of the mid to late 1800s, as well as encouraging the immigration that followed.
- The Irish Potato Famine and other problems in Europe encouraged mass immigration to America. People fled the problems at home in order to prosper from the freedom and financial security that they had heard existed in America.
- As the 20th Century drew closer, the Dream became that of industry and capitalism, with men such as John D Rockefeller beginning life in humble conditions, but going on to control vast corporations and the fortunes that resulted.
- Successes such as these suggested that talent, intelligence and a willingness to work hard were all that was needed to achieve the dream.
- America has always been perceived as a place where the streets are paved with gold; consequently, there are more legal immigrants to the US per annum than any other country in the world. They were (and are) drawn to work in the major cities such as New York, Chicago and Detroit.
- During the 1920s and 1930s, the Depression was a cause of major hardship and seemed to be a reverse of the Dream which people had held dear for so long.
- The end of WWII drew young American families to live in comfort and stability in the suburbs, living the life of a 'perfect family'. However, the rise of the hippy values of the 1960s rejected this ideal - but did not kill it off entirely.
- Some say that that the American Dream is misleading. It is impossible for everyone to gain prosperity simply through hard work and determination. The consequence of this is that those who do not achieve success believe that it is entirely their fault.
- In addition, the poor are penalised as their poverty is seen as proof of their laziness.
- The American Dream does not take account of the fact that the family and wealth that one is born into, as well as traits such as natural intelligence, have a bearing on potential success in life.
- The word 'Dream' is important - what does it suggest?
- In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller shows that the American Dream is superficial and meaningless.

As you read the play, remember to look for quotations that are relevant to the theme of the American Dream, and add them to your chart.

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THEATRICAL CONTEXT

In 1947, Miller saw Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* on stage and was impressed at how Williams had used a mixture of **realism** and **expressionism** to create a unique feeling for his play. It is this influence that we see in *Death of a Salesman*.

REALISM

- An artistic movement which began in France in the 19th Century.
- It sought to accurately portray everyday characters, situations and problems.
- The language used was as close as possible to natural conversation.
- Costumes were contemporary and sets were three-dimensional and lifelike.
- The plays were usually about social problems.

IBSEN; CHEKHOV; BERNARD SHAW

Miller was fascinated by Expressionism but didn't want to give up the conventions of Realism. In *Death of a Salesman*, he incorporates the two so that we see the reality of the events as well as the turmoil that Willy is undergoing.

Sometimes, this takes the form of Willy's past experiences being acted out; at other times, it is in the appearance of characters from the past in Willy's present.

Some people call these events 'flashbacks'. Miller did not. He said that it is 'literally that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present'. ... 'There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present ... because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.'

EXPRESSIONISM

- Was a reaction to realism and began in the 1900s.
- It sought to portray the inner psychological life of a character, concentrating on a subjective view of the world rather than an objective one.
- Plot, structure and characterisation were less important than poetic dialogue.
- Lighting was used to create atmosphere.

MAINLY SEEN IN SCANDINAVIA, BUT ALSO IN THE WORK OF EUGENE O'NEILL AND THORNTON WILDER

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THEATRICAL CONTEXT - TRAGEDY

- A tragedy, in the theatrical sense, is a serious play which represents the disastrous downfall of a central character (the protagonist). In some Ancient Greek tragedies, a happy ending was possible, but the more usual ending is that the protagonist dies.
- Aristotle (4th Century) defined a tragedy as an action which is serious and complete, with the protagonist achieving **catharsis** (purification) through incidents which arouse pity and terror. The protagonist is led to this point through **hamartia** (an error) which often takes the form of **hubris** (excessive pride).
- Traditionally, the protagonist would be of high status.
- The protagonist in a tragedy has a character defect or **tragic flaw** which brings about their downfall.
- *Death of a Salesman*, with its concerns for a socially inferior protagonist, may be considered a domestic tragedy.