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Death of a Salesman (Miller)

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Death of a Salesman

Arthur Miller, 1949

Penguin Group USA

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Summary

Ever since it was first performed in 1949, *Death of a Salesman* has been recognized as a milestone of the American theater.

In the person of Willy Loman, the aging, failing salesman who makes his living riding on a smile and a shoeshine, Arthur Miller redefined the tragic hero as a man whose dreams are at once insupportably vast and dangerously insubstantial. He has given us a figure whose name has become a symbol for a kind of majestic grandiosity—and a play that compresses epic extremes of humor and anguish, promise and loss, between the four walls of an American living room. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—October 17, 1915
- Where—New York, New York, USA
- Death—February 10, 2005
- Where—Roxbury, Connecticut
- Education—B.A., University of Michigan
- Awards—Tony Award (twice); Pulitzer Prize; New York Drama Circle Critics Award; National Medal of the Arts; Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize; Jerusalem Prize; Principe de Asturias Prize (Spain)

Arthur Asher Miller was an American playwright and essayist. He was a prominent figure in American theatre, writing dramas that include plays such as *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (one-act, 1955; revised two-act, 1956).

Miller was often in the public eye, particularly during the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, a period during which he testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Principe de Asturias Award, and was married to Marilyn Monroe.

Early life

Arthur Asher Miller was born, in Harlem, New York City, the second of three children of Isidore and Augusta Miller, Polish-Jewish immigrants. His father, a mostly illiterate but moderately wealthy businessman, owned a women's clothing store employing 400 people. The family, including his younger sister Joan, lived on East 110th Street in Manhattan and owned a summer house in Far Rockaway, Queens. They employed a chauffeur. In the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the family lost almost everything and moved to Gravesend, Brooklyn. As a teenager, Miller delivered bread every morning before school to help the family. After graduating in 1932 from Abraham Lincoln High School, he worked at several menial jobs to pay for his college tuition.

At the University of Michigan, Miller first majored in journalism and worked as a reporter and night editor for the student paper, the Michigan Daily. It was during this time that he wrote his first play, *No Villain*. Miller switched his major to English, and subsequently won the Avery Hopwood Award for *No Villain*. The award brought him his first recognition and led him to begin to consider that he could have a career as a playwright. Miller enrolled in a playwriting seminar taught by the influential Professor Kenneth Rowe, who instructed him in his early forays into playwriting; Rowe emphasized how a play is built in order to achieve its intended effect, or what Miller called "the dynamics of play construction." Rowe provided realistic feedback along with much-needed encouragement, and became a lifelong friend. Miller retained strong ties to his alma mater throughout the rest of his life, establishing the university's Arthur Miller Award in 1985 and Arthur Miller Award for Dramatic Writing in 1999, and lending his name to the Arthur Miller Theatre in 2000. In 1937, Miller wrote *Honors at Dawn*, which also received the Avery Hopwood Award.

In 1938, Miller received a BA in English. After graduation, he joined the Federal Theater Project, a New Deal agency established to provide jobs in the theater. He chose the theater project although he had an offer to work as a scriptwriter for 20th Century Fox. However, Congress, worried about possible Communist infiltration, closed the project in 1939. Miller began working in the Brooklyn Navy Yard while continuing to write radio plays, some of which were broadcast on CBS.

On August 5, 1940, he married his college sweetheart, Mary Slattery, the Catholic daughter of an insurance salesman. The couple had two children, Jane and Robert. Miller was exempted from military service during World War II because of a high-school football injury to his left kneecap. Robert, a writer and film director, produced the 1996 movie version of *The Crucible*.

Early career

In 1940 Miller wrote *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, which was produced in New Jersey in 1940 and won the Theatre Guild's National Award. The play closed after four performances and disastrous reviews. In his book *Trinity of Passion*, author Alan M. Wald conjectures that Miller was "a member of a writer's unit of the Communist Party around 1946", using the pseudonym Matt Wayne, and editing a drama column in the magazine *The New Masses*. In 1946 Miller's play *All My Sons*, the writing of which had commenced in 1941, was a success on Broadway (earning him his first Tony Award, for Best Author) and his reputation as a playwright was established.

In 1948 Miller built a small studio in Roxbury, Connecticut. There, in less than a day, he wrote Act I of *Death of a Salesman*. Within six weeks, he completed the rest of the play, one of the classics of world theater. *Death of a Salesman* premiered on Broadway on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre, directed by Elia Kazan, and starring Lee J. Cobb as Willy Loman, Mildred Dunnock as Linda, Arthur Kennedy as Biff, and Cameron Mitchell as Happy. The play was commercially successful and critically acclaimed, winning a Tony Award for Best Author, the New York Drama Circle Critics' Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It was the first play to win all three of these major awards. The play was performed 742 times.

In 1952, Kazan appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); fearful of being blacklisted from Hollywood, Kazan named eight members of the Group Theatre, including Clifford Odets, Paula Strasberg, Lillian Hellman, Joe Bromberg, and John Garfield, who in recent years had been fellow members of the Communist Party. After speaking with Kazan about his testimony Miller traveled to Salem, Massachusetts to research the witch trials of 1692. *The Crucible*, in which Miller likened the situation with the House Un-American Activities Committee to the witch hunt in Salem in 1692, opened at the Beck Theatre on Broadway on January 22, 1953. Though widely considered only somewhat successful at the time of its initial release, today *The Crucible* is Miller's most frequently produced work throughout the world and was adapted into an opera by Robert Ward which won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1962. Miller and Kazan were close friends throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, but after Kazan's testimony to the HUAC, the pair's friendship ended, and they did not speak to each other for the next ten years. The HUAC took an interest in Miller himself not long after *The Crucible* opened, denying him a passport to attend the play's London opening in 1954. Kazan defended his

own actions through his film *On the Waterfront*, in which a dockworker heroically testifies against a corrupt union boss.

1956-1964

In 1956, a one-act version of Miller's verse drama *A View from the Bridge* opened on Broadway in a joint bill with one of Miller's lesser-known plays, *A Memory of Two Mondays*. The following year, Miller revised *A View from the Bridge* as a two-act prose drama, which Peter Brook directed in London.

In June 1956, Miller left his first wife Mary Slattery and on June 25 he married Marilyn Monroe. Miller and Monroe had met in April 23 1951, when they had a brief affair, and had remained in contact since then.

When Miller applied in 1956 for a routine renewal of his passport, the HUAC used this opportunity to subpoena him to appear before the committee. Before appearing, Miller asked the committee not to ask him to name names, to which the chairman agreed.

When Miller attended the hearing, to which Monroe accompanied him, risking her own career, he gave the committee a detailed account of his political activities. Reneging on the chairman's promise, the committee demanded the names of friends and colleagues who had participated in similar activities. Miller refused to comply, saying "I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him." As a result, a judge found Miller guilty of contempt of Congress in May 1957. Miller was sentenced to a \$500 fine or thirty days in prison, blacklisted, and disallowed a US passport. In 1958, his conviction was overturned by the court of appeals, which ruled that Miller had been misled by the chairman of the HUAC.

Miller began work on *The Misfits*, starring his wife. Miller later said that the filming was one of the lowest points in his life; shortly before the film's premiere in 1961, the pair divorced; 19 months later, Monroe died of an apparent drug overdose.

Miller married photographer Inge Morath on February 17, 1962 and the first of their two children, Rebecca, was born that September. Their son Daniel was born with Down syndrome in November 1966; he was institutionalized and excluded from the Millers' personal life at Arthur's insistence. The couple remained together until Inge's death in 2002. Arthur Miller's son-in-law, actor Daniel Day-Lewis, is said to have visited Daniel frequently, and to have persuaded Arthur Miller to reunite with his adult son.

Later career

In 1964 Miller's next play was produced. *After the Fall* is a deeply personal view of Miller's experiences during his marriage to Monroe. The play reunited Miller with his

former friend Kazan: they collaborated on both the script and the direction. *After the Fall* opened on January 23, 1964 at the ANTA Theatre in Washington Square Park amid a flurry of publicity and outrage at putting a Monroe-like character, called Maggie, on stage. That same year, Miller produced *Incident at Vichy*. In 1965, Miller was elected the first American president of International PEN, a position which he held for four years. During this period Miller wrote the penetrating family drama, *The Price*, produced in 1968. It was Miller's most successful play since *Death of a Salesman*.

In 1969, Miller's works were banned in the Soviet Union after he campaigned for the freedom of dissident writers. Throughout the 1970s, Miller spent much of his time experimenting with the theatre, producing one-act plays such as "Fame" and "The Reason Why," and traveling with his wife, producing *In The Country* and *Chinese Encounters* with her. Both his 1972 comedy *The Creation of the World and Other Business* and its musical adaptation, *Up from Paradise*, were critical and commercial failures.

Miller was an unusually articulate commentator on his own work. In 1978 he published a collection of his *Theater Essays*, edited by Robert A. Martin and with a foreword by Miller. Highlights of the collection included Miller's introduction to his *Collected Plays*, his reflections on the theory of tragedy, comments on the McCarthy Era, and pieces arguing for a publicly supported theater. Reviewing this collection in the Chicago Tribune, Studs Terkel remarked, "in reading [the *Theater Essays*]...you are exhilaratingly aware of a social critic, as well as a playwright, who knows what he's talking about."

In 1983, Miller traveled to China to produce and direct *Death of a Salesman* at the People's Art Theatre in Beijing. The play was a success in China and in 1984, *Salesman in Beijing*, a book about Miller's experiences in Beijing, was published. Around the same time, *Death of a Salesman* was made into a TV movie starring Dustin Hoffman as Willy Loman and John Malkovich as Biff. Shown on CBS, it attracted 25 million viewers. In late 1987, Miller's autobiographical work, *Timebends*, was published, in which he talks about his experiences with Monroe in detail. During the early 1990s Miller wrote three new plays, *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *The Last Yankee* (1992), and *Broken Glass* (1994). In 1996, a film of *The Crucible* starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder opened. Miller spent much of 1996 working on the screenplay to the film. Mr. Peters' Connections was staged Off-Broadway in 1998, and *Death of a Salesman* was revived on Broadway in 1999 to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. The play, once again, was a large critical success, winning a Tony Award for best revival of a play.

In 1993, he was awarded the National Medal of Arts. In 2001 the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) selected Miller for the Jefferson Lecture, the

U.S. federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities. Miller's lecture was entitled "On Politics and the Art of Acting." Miller's lecture analyzed political events (including the U.S. presidential election of 2000) in terms of the "arts of performance", and it drew attacks from some conservatives such as Jay Nordlinger, who called it "a disgrace," and George Will, who argued that Miller was not legitimately a "scholar."

In 1999 Miller was awarded The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, one of the richest prizes in the arts, given annually to "a man or woman who has made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind's enjoyment and understanding of life." On May 1, 2002, Miller was awarded Spain's Principe de Asturias Prize for Literature as "the undisputed master of modern drama". Later that year, Ingeborg Morath died of lymphatic cancer at the age of 78. The following year Miller won the Jerusalem Prize.

Miller died of heart failure after a battle against cancer, pneumonia and congestive heart disease at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut. He had been in hospice care at his sister's apartment in New York since his release from hospital the previous month. He died on the evening of February 10, 2005 (the 56th anniversary of the Broadway debut of *Death of a Salesman*), aged 89, surrounded by Barley, family and friends.

Legacy

Miller's career as a writer spanned over seven decades, and at the time of his death, Miller was considered to be one of the greatest dramatists of the twentieth century. After his death, many respected actors, directors, and producers paid tribute to Miller, some calling him the last great practitioner of the American stage, and Broadway theatres darkened their lights in a show of respect. Miller's alma mater, the University of Michigan opened the Arthur Miller Theatre in March, 2007. Per his express wish, it is the only theatre in the world that bears Miller's name.

Christopher Bigsby wrote *Arthur Miller: The Definitive Biography* based on boxes of papers Miller made available to him before his death in 2005. The book was published in November 2008, and is reported to reveal unpublished works in which Miller "bitterly attack[ed] the injustices of American racism long before it was taken up by the civil rights movement."

Miller's papers are housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin. (*From Wikipedia.*)

Book Reviews

(*Pre-internet works have few mainstream reviews online. See Amazon and Barnes & Noble for helpful customer reviews.*)

By common consent, this is one of the finest dramas in the whole range of the American theatre. Humane in its point of view, it has stature and insight, awareness of life, respect for people and knowledge of American manners.... [I]t is virtuoso theatre. It brings the whole theatre alive.

Brook Atkinson - New York Times (2/20/1949)

What accounts for Mr. Miller's continuing appeal? Perhaps some of the very aspects of his work that seem so old-fashioned--his moral seriousness and fondness or mythic intonations...--are refreshing anomalies in this age of relentless irony and cynicism.... Mr. Miller's assumption that "life has meaning" appeals to our vestigial belief (or hope).... [H]is efforts, however ham-handed, to address the large questions of right and wrong suggest that the theater still matters, that it can still provide a venue or intellectual debate.

Michiko Kakutani - New York Times (2/7/1999, 50th anniversary production)

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Willy kill himself?
2. What does Linda mean when, at the end of the play, she says repeatedly, "We're free"? (p. 112)
3. Why does Willy refuse Charley's numerous offers of a job?
4. Why is Willy's perception of Biff consistently inaccurate?
5. Why does Biff steal Bill Oliver's pen?
6. After Biff insists that he and Willy both acknowledge the truth about who they are, why does Willy then say of Biff, "he likes me!"? (p. 106)
7. What does Charley mean when he says, "No man only needs a little salary"? (p. 110)
8. Why does Happy insist that Willy "had a good dream"? (p. 111)
9. What does Willy mean when he says to Linda, "some people accomplish something"? (p. 5)

10. Why is it so important to Willy that he be well liked?
11. Why does Willy plant the garden after his dinner with Biff and Happy?
12. To what is Biff referring when he says to Willy, "will you let me out of it," while trying to tell Willy about his meeting with Bill Oliver? (p. 85)
13. At what point does the pursuit of dreams turn into a harmful denial of one's actual circumstances?
14. Can Willy be called a tragic figure in the same way that this term applies to various characters in Greek drama?
15. Do American ideals exalt the freedom of the individual at the expense of the welfare of the community?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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