



# 11th Grade Summer Reading Assignment

## Death of a Salesman

By Arthur Miller

**Directions:** Over the summer, you are required to read the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. When you are done, read the notes on tragedy and answer the questions that follow. Review the argumentative essay task and write a well developed essay.

**Play Preview:** Willy Loman, the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, has spent his life following the American way, living out his belief in salesmanship as a way to reinvent himself. But somehow the riches and respect he covets have eluded him. At age 63, he searches for the moment his life took a wrong turn, the moment of betrayal that undermined his relationship with his wife and destroyed his relationship with Biff, the son in whom he invested his faith. Willy lives in a fragile world of elaborate excuses and daydreams, conflating past and present in a desperate attempt to make sense of himself and of a world that once promised so much.  
– From Amazon.com

## Grading Criteria

**Task 1 – Understanding Tragedy: 40%**

**Task 2 – Argumentative Essay: 60%**

## ***Death of a Salesman: Characters***

**Directions:** Refer to this character list before, during, and after reading to aid in your understanding of the play.

**Willy Loman** – The salesman of the title, and the husband of Linda. We never learn what he sells, but he has thoroughly bought into a version of the American Dream in which charisma and luck count for more than diligence or wisdom. All his life, he represents himself to his family as being constantly on the verge of huge success, while privately wondering why he has not risen to the heights that he believes he is capable of reaching. Eventually, this division between his dreams and reality results in mental collapse, in which he relives significant moments from his past without learning the lessons of that past. He invests all his hope in his sons and is disappointed in the way they have turned out, not realizing that his shallow dream of success has influenced both Biff's disillusionment and Happy's shallowness. His death represents a final transformation of himself into a commodity— a life insurance policy—for the benefit of his family, whose love he failed to fully recognize while he was still with them.

**Biff Loman** – Willy and Linda's elder son. He has always been in the shadow of his father's expectations for him, beginning with his starred career as a high school football player and prospective college student. At that impressionable age, he witnesses Willy's affair with The Woman, which is enough to shake his faith in everything his father has ever told him. When the play begins, he is grasping for answers in his life, having worked as a farm laborer for years and still unable to meet his father's standards of success. In the course of the play, he has the revelation that he, like his father, is not destined for greatness. But he realizes that he can still achieve happiness through his own, simpler version of the American Dream: working with his hands in wide-open spaces, doing the things that fulfill him. He represents Willy's better, more honest nature, which Willy tragically turns away from.

**Linda Loman** – Willy's wife. She remains devoted to him even as he betrays her at two major points during the play: committing adultery with The Woman as a younger man, and committing suicide with the deluded belief that he will solve the family's problems by doing so. As the person closest to Willy, she realizes that he is trying to kill himself, and exhorts her sons to show him more love. However, she is as responsible for his death as any of the other characters, as her encouragement fuels Willy in his doomed pursuit of glory.

**Happy Loman** – Willy and Linda’s younger son. He is the assistant to an assistant manager at a department store, and is always willing to do whatever is convenient: be duplicitous to his family, take bribes at work, or sleep with the girlfriends of his colleagues. At the end of the play he resolves to carry on Willy’s legacy by making as much money as possible, which is a twisted misinterpretation of what Willy’s death meant. In the importance that Happy places on getting ahead, and in his readiness to delude himself, he represents the worst aspects of Willy’s nature.

**Ben Loman** – Willy’s adventurous brother, who has just died in Africa when the play begins. At moments of great stress or doubt, Willy converses with Ben’s ghost. Ben is the embodiment of the most old-fashioned aspect of the American Dream, the idea that a man can set out into the wilderness by himself and come back wealthy. Willy regrets not following Ben’s path and testing himself against rugged natural settings. Yet he barely knew Ben, and Ben showed contempt for him on his few visits to Willy’s home.

**Charley** – Willy’s neighbor, a steady businessman. He is a constant friend to Willy through the years, though Willy is quick to take offense whenever Charley tries to bring Willy’s unrealistic dreams down to earth. Charley foresees Willy’s destruction and tries to save him by offering him a job. He gives the final elegy about what it meant for Willy to live and die as a salesman.

**Bernard** – Charley’s son, he is studious and hardworking. As a boy in high school, he warns Biff not to flunk math, a warning both Biff and Willy ignore. He grows up to be a successful lawyer who is about to argue a case before the Supreme Court.

**The Woman** – Willy’s mistress in Boston, during the time that Biff and Happy were in high school. She is a secretary to one of the buyers, and picked Willy as a lover because, it seems, she is able to exploit him for gifts.

**Howard Wagner** – Willy’s boss and the son of Frank Wagner, who founded the company for which Willy works. A cold, selfish man, he inherits his success without building anything himself. He refuses to take the personal association between Willy and his father into account when he tells Willy there is no place for him at the New York office. He represents the new, impersonal face of the sales business.

**Stanley** – A waiter at Frank’s Chop House, who is friendly with Happy but has sympathy for Willy’s plight.

**Miss Forsythe** – A call girl Biff and Happy met at Frank’s Chop House.

**Letta** – A call girl friend of Miss Forsythe.

**Jenny** – Charley’s secretary.

**Bill Oliver** – Biff’s former boss. Though crucial to the plot, he doesn’t appear onstage.

**Source:** <http://www.litcharts.com/lit/deathofasalesman/characters>

## Task 1: Understanding Tragedy

**Directions:** Read the following notes on tragedy and the tragic hero and answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of paper. Please type your responses. This section is worth 40% of your grade; therefore, utilize relevant textual evidence to write a well-developed answer for each question.

### THEATRICAL CONTEXT – TRAGEDY

- A tragedy is a serious play which represents the disastrous downfall of a central character (the protagonist). In some Ancient Greek tragedies, the usual ending for a tragedy is that the protagonist dies.
- The great philosopher, Aristotle 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 noble birth or high status.
- The protagonist (tragic hero) in a tragedy has a character defect or **tragic flaw** which brings about his or her downfall. Because of his/her flaw, we the reader or viewer can relate to him or her.
- According to Aristotle, “A man cannot become a hero until he sees the root of his own downfall.” Based on this statement, a tragic hero must reach an awareness of his own flaws.
- Arthur Miller believed that the common man can also be a tragic hero. According to Miller, one does not need to be of noble birth or a higher class to possess a tragic flaw or become a tragic hero.
- Ultimately, Miller believed that anyone whose own character flaws leads to their own demise is capable of being a tragic hero.
- Simply possessing a tragic flaw doesn’t make someone a hero. In order to determine if a tragic character is a hero, consider if he or she has done something heroic (a selfless act).

#### **Critical Reading Questions:**

1. What is Willy’s dream? What is he searching for throughout the play? Why doesn’t he find it?
2. Biff says, “He had the wrong dreams.” What was wrong about Willy’s dreams?
3. What are some of Willy Loman’s flaws? Can any of these flaws be considered tragic? Why or why not? Use evidence from the play to support your answer.
4. Is Willy Loman’s suicide a heroic act? Why or why not? Develop your response with supporting textual evidence.

## **Task 3: Argumentative Essay**

### **Context**

What is a tragic hero? According to the great philosopher Aristotle, a tragic hero is a person of noble birth with heroic qualities. This person eventually faces a downfall caused by fate or some tragic flaw inherent in him or her. In a tragic drama, the tragic hero eventually recognizes his or her inherent tragic flaw, thus leading him or her to a greater self-awareness. *Death of a Salesman* playwright Arthur Miller redefined the tragic hero in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to include the common man. Miller felt that we all possess flaws, and are seeking our true identity, thereby giving us all the potential to be a tragic hero.

### **Task**

In a well-organized argumentative essay of at least five paragraphs (you are welcome to write more), answer the following question.

**Based on Aristotle’s and Arthur Miller’s definition of a tragic hero, is Willy Loman a tragic hero? Why or why not?**

### **Guidelines**

In your essay, be sure to:

- Write an introduction with an overview of the play
- Write a thesis with supporting reasons (Is Willy Loman a tragic hero? Why or why not?)
- Include several examples from the play in your body paragraphs
- **Include at least one direct quote from the play in each body paragraph**
- Provide analysis of each example or quote given
- Identify and analyze the counterargument and provide a rebuttal to the counterargument
- Write a conclusion which restates your thesis and sums up your argument
- Your essay should be typed (12 pt. font, double spaced, 1 inch margins)

### **Suggested Outline**

- I. Introduction
  - A. Overview of the play
  - B. Thesis and supporting reasons (Is Willy Loman a tragic hero? Why or why not?)**
- II. Body Paragraph 1
  - A. Supporting reasons
  - B. Examples and quotes
  - C. Analysis of example and quotes
- III. Body Paragraph 2
  - A. Supporting reasons
  - B. Examples and quotes
  - C. Analysis of example and quotes
- IV. Counterargument
  - A. Identify the counterargument (opposing view point to your thesis)
  - B. Examples and quotes
  - C. Rebuttal (Why is your thesis stronger?)**
  - D. Analysis of example and quotes
- V. Conclusion
  - A. Restate thesis
  - B. Sum up argument
  - C. Leave the reader with a final thought related to theme