

Literature Notes – Death of a Salesman

Context

Death of a Salesman is a text written by Arthur Miller, and is set in New York City in the year 1949. It is subtitled '*Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem*', and has won the Pulitzer Prize, and has run more than 700 times on Broadway. It is a portrayal of middle class America in that time.

- The irony comes in the fact that DoS is subtitled 'certain private conversations' ... yet almost all the members of the audience will be able to relate to what is going on (thus making the whole story known, while still private)

Motifs

Car accidents:

- Car accidents portray the possible suicide attempts by Willy, and his eventual form of death
- When Linda says in the opening scene "You didn't smash the car, did you?", she shows concern because he would often experience near-accident issues while driving
- Willy responds with "casual irritation", suggesting a lack of worry – hence showing that he feels that it would not have made a difference even if he did

Sneakers:

- Biff's sneakers which say 'University of Virginia' are a motif that represents his dreams for success
- Biff had always idolized his father as his 'hero', he would sit down with his father to talk (and they would be on good terms), until the incident where he caught Willy cheating on Linda – where he lost all respect for his hero, all drive and motivation to succeed, and he burned his 'University of Virginia' sneakers
- Can be contrasted with Dave Singleman's green velvet slippers: where Biff had burned up his success, or all potential for it (by burning up the sneakers), Singleman achieved success (and thus wears them at age eighty-four)

Seeds:

- Seeds are a metaphor for a new life for the Loman family, but Linda suggests that this will never be attained when she says that nothing will grow anymore in the backyard (where Willy intends to plant the seeds)

The American Dream

Through the main character Willy Loman, Miller explores the myth of the American Dream, and the shallow promise of happiness through material wealth. Willy portrays how undivided faith in such a dream can yield tragic results, and can go completely unfulfilled (though desperately attempted).

Such an example of a man who lived the American dream is Henry Ford (in the 1920s), and automobile industry tycoon.

Willy Loman

At sixty-three years of age, Loman is desperate to achieve a small measure of the American Dream he has always aspired to achieve. He cannot face the reality that his whole life has amounted to

nothing (none of his dreams are fulfilled, he is poor, he is not known by people beyond), and he finally harbours the hope that his dreams may carry on in the form of his son Biff. When Biff apologizes to Willy and tells Willy that he forgives him, Willy feels that Biff has now overlooked the Boston incident, and will continue to pursue a career as a businessman (which is now the only hope for his personal dream to live on, though through his son) – he knows he had tried all measures to secure a start-up capital (by sending Biff to make a business proposition, which ultimately fails). He then resorts to suicide to secure Biff this start-up capital by means of a life insurance payoff.