

Novel·Ties

DEATH OF A SALESMAN Arthur Miller



A Study Guide

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LEARNING LINKS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Synopsis	1 - 2
About the Author	2
Pre-Reading Activities	3
Act I	4 - 8
Act II	9 - 15
Requiem	16
Cloze Activity	17
Post-Reading Activities	18
Suggestions For Further Reading	19
Answer Key	20 - 21
Notes	22

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For the Teacher

This reproducible study guide consists of instructional material to use in conjunction with *Death of a Salesman*. Written in scene-by-scene format, this guide contains a synopsis, pre-reading activities, vocabulary and comprehension exercises, as well as extension activities to be used as follow-up to the play.

NOVEL-TIES are either for whole class instruction using a single title or for group instruction where each group uses a different work appropriate to its reading level. Depending upon the amount of time allotted to it in the classroom, each work, with its guide and accompanying lessons, may be completed in two to four weeks.

The first step in using NOVEL-TIES is to distribute to each student a copy of the play and a folder containing all of the duplicated worksheets. Begin instruction by selecting several pre-reading activities in order to set the stage for the reading ahead. Vocabulary exercises for each chapter always precede the reading so that new words will be reinforced in the context of the book. Use the questions on the chapter worksheets for class discussion or as written exercises.

The benefits of using NOVEL-TIES are numerous. Students read good literature in the original, rather than in abridged or edited form. The good reading habits formed by practice in focusing on interpretive comprehension and literary techniques will be transferred to the books students read independently. Passive readers become active, avid readers.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. The classical definition of a tragic hero is a character who experiences an inner struggle due to some flaw within his character. That struggle ends in defeat of the hero. As you read this play, determine whether Willy Loman fits the description of a tragic hero.
2. With a small cooperative learning group, discuss the following aspects of the life of a traveling salesman:
 - definition of the job
 - extent of territory a salesman may cover
 - job security and remuneration
 - effect on personal life

At the conclusion of this discussion, determine whether you think manufacturing firms are experiencing a greater or diminishing need for traveling salespersons.

3. To what degree do you think being well-liked is an important element in someone's success? Are there any careers where an endearing personality is more important than others? Are there any ways in which striving to be well-liked could be detrimental to a career?
4. Work with a partner to develop a list of circumstances under which father-son relationships could become difficult. Consider factors such as age, goals, education, and financial circumstances.
5. Discuss with your classmates the concept of success. Would it be possible for all of you to reach a common definition? Upon what factors does success depend? Might a person's notion of success change with age? What kind of conflicts might develop between an individual's goals for success and those espoused by family or society?
6. All of the current action in *Death of a Salesman* takes place within the interior of a middle class home. Find photographs or illustrations showing domestic interiors in 1949, the first year this play was performed. Notice the difference between homes then and now.

Act I (cont.)

3. Why was Willy dissatisfied with his son Biff?
4. Why did Biff and Happy feel dissatisfied with their own lives?
5. Why did Charley leave Willy's kitchen in anger? What did this interchange reveal about Willy?
6. Why did Linda chastise her sons? Do you think she was justified in doing this, or did she contribute to their behavior?
7. Why did Willy express optimism at the end of Act One? Do you think he really felt this way? Is his optimism justified?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think Linda meant when she said, "life is a casting off"? Do you agree? Why do you think Willy replied by saying, "some people accomplish something"? Do you think that Willy and Linda have similar or different attitudes toward life?
2. Why do you think Willy enjoyed his reminiscences of the past more than his present life?
3. How would you explain the contrast between the way Willy described his career and the real degree of his success?
4. Why do you think Willy was haunted by the memory of his brother Ben?

Literary Devices:

- I. *Flashback* — A flashback is a scene or series of scenes that show events that happened at an earlier time. How did the playwright signal the switch to past time in the first flashback?

The first flashback is used to provide background information about the Loman family. The source of each of their current problems was revealed in the past. What problems do you think Willy might have overlooked in his son Biff?

What negative values did he impart to his sons?
