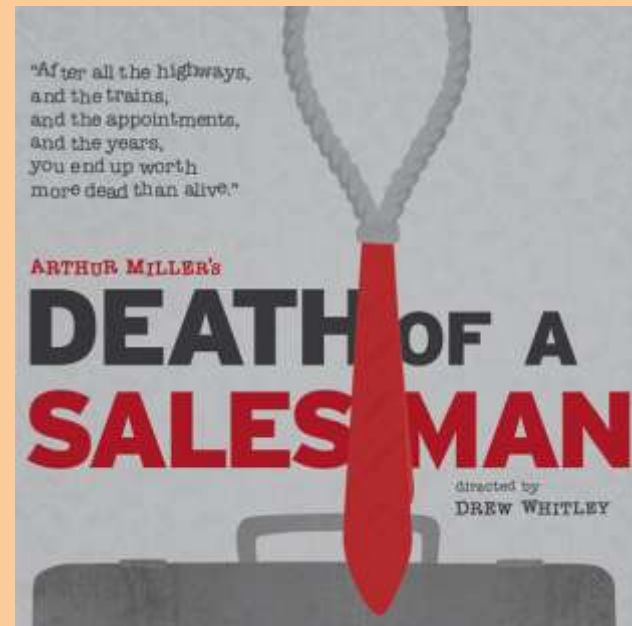


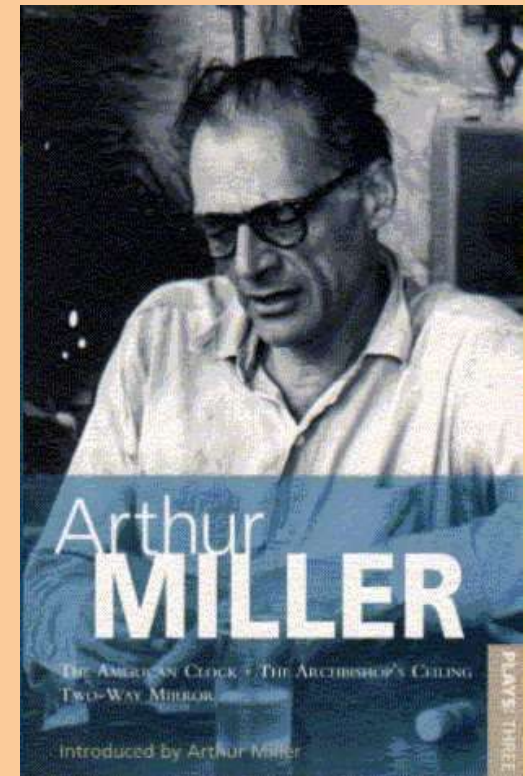
Death of a Salesman

PART ONE : introduction
– and some teaching ideas



Some personal reasons why **D** of a **S** is a great play to study

- Arthur Miller: his life and works
- American literature
- Post-War US background but deals with contemporary and relatable issues
- Interesting and relatable characters
- Accessible for students but sufficiently challenging
- Theatricality - scope for a huge range of interactive activities
- Lots of resources available
- Discussion topics ??



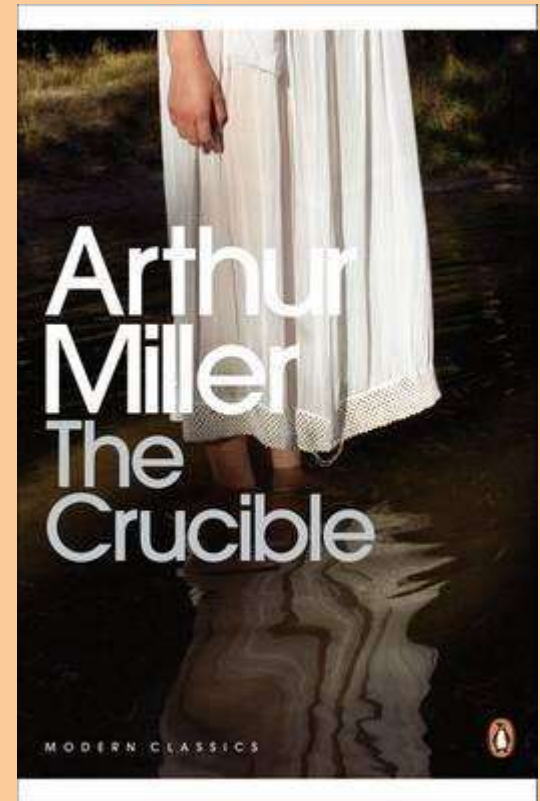
ARTHUR MILLER: The Playwright



- 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.

ARTHUR MILLER: The Playwright

- 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.





ARTHUR MILLER: The plays

All My Sons

1947

About a family coping with having a son listed as missing in action during WWII.

New York
Drama
Critics Circle
Award

Death of a Salesman

1949

An examination of American life and consumerism

Drama
Critics Circle
Award;
Pulitzer
Prize

The Crucible

1953

About witch-hunts in colonial Salem, it implied a parallel with the McCarthy trials

Tony Award

A View From the Bridge

1955

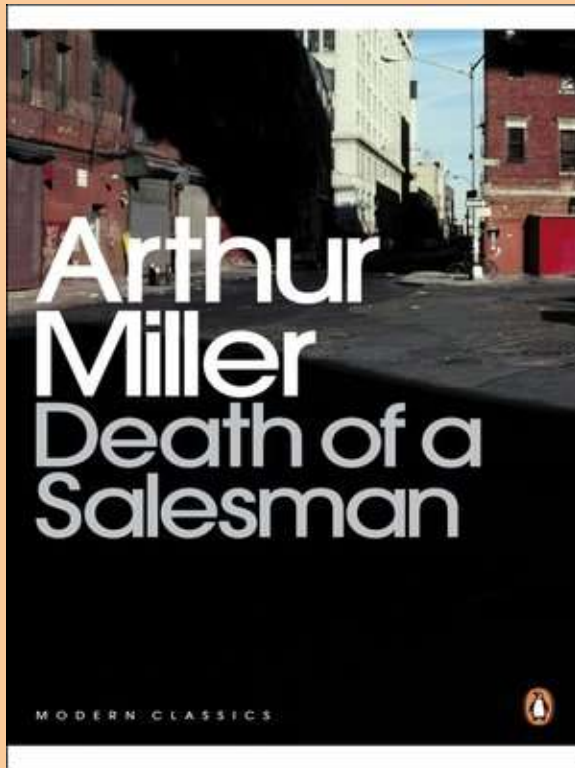
The self discovery and fall of a Brooklyn dock worker questioning US immigration laws

After the Fall

1964

About an unhappy marriage

ARTHUR MILLER: Death of a Salesman (1949)



- Death of a Salesman won the Pulitzer Prize and transformed Miller into a national sensation.
- Sometimes described Death of a Salesman as the first great American Tragedy

Context

- Capitalism :
 - Depression
 - The Wall Street Crash
 - consumerism
- The American Dream
 - Family tensions (Arthur Miller's own life)
- The Tragic Hero – Greek definition and Miller's definition
- Post-war context:
 - Cold War
 - Existentialist philosophy
 - American stance





Synopsis

- This play is about the Loman family who live in America in the 1940s.
- The protagonist, Willy Loman, is a salesman struggling to make enough money to pay the bills
- He is obsessed with appearing to be successful and 'well liked'.
- Willy has a long-suffering wife, Linda, and two sons: Biff and Happy.
- Although Biff was extremely popular and a talented footballer in his youth, he is still trying to 'find himself' at the age of thirty-four
- The ironically named Happy is boastful and competitive but equally dissatisfied with his life.



Some key questions

- The structure of the play is such that we are not so much interested in asking, 'what is going to happen to this family?' as 'what has happened to this family to make them like they are?'
- The play is pervaded by different kinds of dreams: the American dream, hopes and ambitions and daydreams and fantasies.
- These dreams motivate the characters, (temporarily) shield them from the disappointing 'reality' of their lives and give them false hopes.
- Arguably, it is the characters' dreams which ultimately lead to the play's tragedy.



Teaching DoS as DRAMA: theatrical context

■ THEATRICAL CONTEXT

- In 1947, Miller saw Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire : **realism** and **expressionism** to create a unique feeling for his play

■ REALISM

- an artistic movement which began in France in the 19th Century.
- 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.

■ EXPRESSIONISM

- reaction to realism and began in the 1900s.
- 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.



Teaching DoS as DRAMA

- 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.'



BUT REMEMBER :

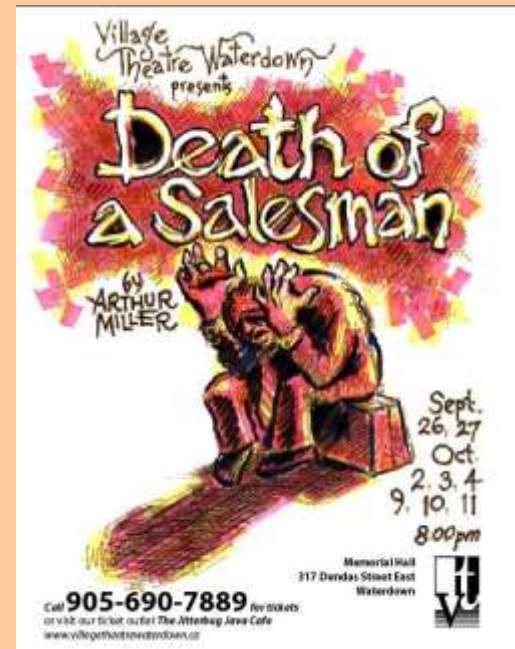
Teaching DoS as DRAMA

■ 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.
- Protagonist : tragic flaw which brings about their downfall.
- Death of a Salesman, with its concerns for a socially inferior protagonist = domestic tragedy.
- “Death of a Salesman relies on its tragic seriousness on the degree to which Willy is representative of the ordinary man whose aspirations reflect the false values of a consumer society; the effect on the audience is one of compassionate understanding rather than tragic pity and terror.”
James Truslow

Teaching DoS as DRAMA

- Consider how the writer creates dramatic effects such as:
 - Conflict : father, son + rivalry ; "structure is that a conflict is discovered and than clarified"
 - Suspense
 - Delay
 - Revelations
 - Contrasts
 - Comedy
- Through
 - Language : explicit, implicit
 - Sound : the flute
 - Lighting : transitions
 - Stagecraft : " a dream rising out of reality" - no acts, montage



Key themes for discussion

- Dreams: the American dream, hopes and ambitions, daydreams and fantasies
- Parents and children/ fathers and sons
- Popularity and success
- Consumer Society and the dangers of capitalism
- The world of business
- Masculinity
- Illusion
- Responsibility
- Depression
- Memory
- The past
- The family
- The role of women
- Competition
- Technology
- Failure to adapt to modern society
- Disillusionment

