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Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Teaching Unit
Individual Learning Packet

Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller

Written by Rebecca Grudzina

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Death of a Salesman

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify and discuss the following themes in this play:
 - A. The city (human civilization) versus nature
 - B. Self-awareness / the role of self-awareness in achieving the American Dream
 - C. The corruption of the American Dream
 - E. *Death of a Salesman* as a modern tragedy
2. examine the realistic and expressionistic aspects of the play.
3. analyze Willy Loman as a tragic hero.
4. identify and comment on the “literary merit” of the play.
5. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
6. respond to writing prompts similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
7. offer a close reading of *Death of a Salesman* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text.

Death of a Salesman

Lecture

Background

Death of a Salesman was written in 1949 and is often regarded as an attack on the materialistic aspect of the American Dream—the achievement of wealth and success without integrity. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1949, the 1949 Tony Award for Best Play, *and* the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play—the first play ever to win these three major awards.

The original production opened on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre in New York, and ran for 742 performances.

The play has been revived on Broadway three times:

June 26, 1975 at the Circle in the Square Theatre, running for 71 performances.

March 29, 1984 at the Broadhurst Theatre, running for 97 performances. Dustin Hoffman played Willy. In a return engagement, this production re-opened on September 14, 1984 and ran for 88 performances. The production won the Tony Award for Best Reproduction.

February 10, 1999 (fiftieth anniversary of the play's original opening) at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, running for 274 performances. This production won Tony Awards for: Best Revival of a Play; Best Actor in Play; Best Featured Actress in a Play; Best Direction of a Play. This production was filmed.

Structure of the Play

The play is divided into three main parts, Act I, Act II, and the Requiem. Each section takes place on a different day in the “present-day” (spring 1949).

Act I: nighttime

Act II: various times the next day

Requiem: several days later

Much of the family's history and the events that have led to the current situation and family dynamic are revealed through flashbacks. These flashbacks also provide a somewhat objective glimpse of the past in contrast to the family members' memories of those same events.

The plots of most plays begin with one or more *inciting incidents* that establish the conflict and set the rising action in motion. In *Death of a Salesman*, the two inciting incidents—both of which actually occurred before the beginning of the play—are Biff's return home after an absence of nearly ten years, and the arrival of the news of Ben's death.

Expressionism:

Expressionism is a broad genre in dramatic and visual art in which the artist distorts reality to create an emotional effect, especially emotional angst. There are very few cheerful expressionist works. This distortion of reality stands in contrast to the conventional goal of the playwright to create a sense of verisimilitude—the appearance of reality.

Oskar Kokoschka's 1909 short play, *Murderer The Hope of Women*, is usually considered the first expressionist drama. In it, an unnamed Man and Woman struggle for dominance. The Man brands the Woman. She stabs and imprisons him. When he manages to free himself, she dies at his touch. As the play ends, the man slaughters everyone around him "like mosquitoes." The extreme simplification of characters to types as opposed to individual persons, use of a Greek-like chorus, overly stylistic dialogue, and heightened emotional intensity would all become characteristics of the expressionist play.

Often, expressionist plays dramatize the protagonist's suffering and spiritual awakening. They also often dramatize the struggle against bourgeois values and society's established authority, often portrayed through the figure of the Father. In Russian playwright Richard Sorge's expressionist play, *The Beggar*, the young hero's mentally ill father has delusions of attaining wealth by mining Mars. The son eventually poisons the father.

In *Parricide*, by Austrian playwright Arnolt Bronnen, the son stabs his tyrannical father to death, and then must rebuff his mother's sexual advances.

Spiritual awakening/reawakening, father-son conflicts of near-Oedipal proportions, paternal delusions, characters that verge on the stereotypical or archetypal, and a stark criticism of the inhumanity and misplaced values inherent in the bourgeois American Dream are all to be found in *Death of a Salesman*.

The stage directions, description of the set, lighting, the use of music, appearance of the characters at different ages, and the appearance of characters who are dead contribute to the unrealistic, expressionistic impression.

Willy Loman as Tragic Hero

Shortly after *Death of a Salesman's* opening in 1949, critics attacked Arthur Miller's claims that his play was a tragedy and its protagonist a tragic hero. In response to these critics, Miller wrote "Tragedy and the Common Man," excerpts of which have been reproduced below. In this essay, Miller attempts to explain what he sees at the heart of even conventional tragedy that substantiates his claim for Willy Loman.

Excerpts from: "Tragedy and the Common Man" an essay by Arthur Miller, 1949

In this age few tragedies are written. ... The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. ... we never hesitate to attribute to the well-placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as the lowly. And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the highbred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, **I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity.** ... [T]he underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society.

Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time ... Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

...The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing...but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. ...

...there are among us today...those who act against the scheme of things that **degrades them**, and in the process of action, everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this...comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy.

The quality in [tragedies] that does shake us...derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, **the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.** ...

Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. ...

The tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and, creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens—and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy, of man's freedom. ...

...

No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any institution, habit, or custom as being either everlasting, immutable, or inevitable. In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination. ...

...

There is a misconception of tragedy ... It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. ... This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinion of the human animal.

For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.

The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force.

Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist. But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief—optimistic, if you will—in the perfectibility of man.

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.

Possible Themes

Corruption of the American Dream / Misplaced Values: Miller accuses America of selling a myth based on capitalist materialism fueled by the thriving post-WW II economy. This rampant materialism has compromised the individualism and integrity that served as the foundation of the original American Dream.

Willy longs for success, not as a result of hard work, but as the reward for “personality,” for being “well-liked,” and “personally attractive.” While striving for this success—the symbol of which is Dave Singleman, the legendary salesman who allegedly made his living from his hotel room, and died alone in that hotel room—Willy is not above lying, stealing (and encouraging his sons to steal), and betraying his wife. In the end, Willy is never able to see the tremendous error of his life, and he sacrifices himself for his misplaced values.

Another aspect of Willy’s corrupted Dream is his inability to understand what success is. Having been abandoned by his father—who apparently became very wealthy in Alaska—Willy is given the opportunity to go to Africa with his brother Ben. Ben too becomes enormously rich, while Willy struggles to achieve what he believes to be the only acceptable image of success—the suit-and-tie businessman. When Biff suggests that Willy might have been more successful, and happier, as a carpenter, Willy yells at him, “Your *grandfather* was better than a carpenter.” Ben continually asks Willy what is worth pursuing about the business deal that cannot be seen or held in the hands. Willy, however, believes too firmly in his vision of Dave Singleman’s effortless success to understand what Ben—and later Biff—realize.

Self-Awareness: Biff knows that he loves working outdoors with his hands. Willy denies the fact that he, too, loves building and working with tools. We first see this in his conversation with Charley in Act I. Given what we learn of Willy’s father and brother Ben, we have to realize that this is a family trait that Willy simply refuses to acknowledge.

Biff, however, is not able to recognize his father’s failure to know himself; instead he sees his father as a fake. Willy’s entire life has been lived according to his ideas about personal attractiveness and being well-liked. He has never questioned these values and never realized that he lived in a delusion. Even when Willy’s version of reality is challenged—his conversation with Howard about his past with the company, his being fired, and Biff’s inability to meet with Bill Oliver—he clings to what he knew: “He cried to me...that boy is going to be magnificent.”

Sadly, Happy seems destined to fall into the same trap. Happy, who craved his father’s attention for his entire life, insisting that he was losing weight and that he was getting married, turns out to be most like Willy in his inability to admit the delusion of the business dream, insisting at the end of the play that he is going to pick up the fight that Willy died fighting.

Conquering the Wilderness: Willy's father left home and found success in Alaska. Willy's brother, Ben, became rich in Africa. These exotic places, associated with adventure and success, stand in stark contrast to Willy's claustrophobic and dreary Brooklyn neighborhood. Just as the apartment buildings on either side of Willy's house literally wall him in, Willy's delusion about the commercial world of the city has trapped him. Even Willy alludes to his role in the company as pioneerish: "When I went north the first time, the Wagner company didn't know where New England was." Thus, even the tame business trip can be, in Willy's mind, the conquering of a vast wilderness, unwilling to yield up its treasures.

While Alaska and Africa stand for Willy's failure, the American West stands for Biff's potential. Biff realizes that he is happy only when working on farms, out in the open. Like the pioneers Biff has traveled westward to pursue the American Dream of freedom and self-determination. Biff and Happy come the closest to dreaming the wholesome American Dream that Miller believes has been corrupted when they joke in Act I about moving out west and starting a ranch.

Discussion and Essay Questions

1. Describe the significance of names in this play. How do Happy's and Biff's names contrast with or support their characters? Interpret the names "Loman" and "Singleman."
2. How reliable are the characters' various narratives in *Death of a Salesman*? Are Willy's words to be trusted? Biff's? How do the flashbacks affect the narrative?
3. What motivates Willy's death at the end of Act II? Is his death heroic?
4. What about this play's set design, music, lighting, and staging make it expressionistic?

Practice Free Response Question 1

Read the opening stage directions that begin, “*A melody is heard*” and end, “*...and follow to their end.*” Then, in a well-organized essay analyze how Arthur Miller uses the visual and audial to set up the audience’s expectations for the action and characters of the play.

Practice Free Response Question 2

Read the scene in the first flashback during Act I, beginning with the stage direction, “*Bernard goes off. The Lomans laugh,*” and ending with Willy’s admitting, “Linda, people don’t seem to take to me.” Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Miller establishes character and the relationships between Willy and the members of his family.

Do not merely provide a character study.

Practice Free Response Question 3

Read the scene toward the end of Act 2, beginning with, “Biff, *taking hoe from Willy*: I’m saying good-bye to you, Pop,” and ending with Willy’s exclaiming, “that boy is going to be magnificent.” Then write a well-organized essay in which you demonstrate how Willy’s change of attitude at the end of the passage is a moment of climax.

Do not merely summarize the plot.

Practice Free Response Question 4

The plot events of many character-driven novels and plays focus on a character who confronts, or is confronted with, the realization of his own distorted or false sense of values. In a well-organized essay, discuss *Death of a Salesman* as Willy’s confrontation and self-evaluation. To what extent do the events at the end of the play qualify Willy as a tragic hero as Arthur Miller defines him?

Do not merely summarize the plot.

Practice Free Response Question 5

Many playwrights and novelists employ a central or controlling metaphor to help establish character and suggest theme. Write a well-organized essay, analyze how the setting, of *Death of a Salesman*, as described in the beginning of Act I, and how Willy's repeated references to being "boxed in" serve as a metaphor for his life.

Practice Free Response Question 6

One common characteristic for literature of merit is that it is more "character-driven" than "plot-driven," the characters, their relationships, and their motivations drive the action—even seemingly unimportant events—rather than the focus being on the "story." Write a well-written essay in which you analyze the literary merit of *Death of a Salesman*.

Practice Free Response Question 7

Instead of creating a sense of verisimilitude, an author or playwright will often distort reality for the sake of an expressionist impression. In a well-written essay, analyze the impact Miller's use of music, set descriptions, and stylized dialogue have on the tone and meaning of the play.

Practice Multiple Choice Questions 1 - 5

Carefully read the beginning sequence of the play, from Linda's first line to Happy's saying, "Sh...Sleep, Biff." Then, answer the multiple choice questions that follow.

1. Linda's questions about why Willy has returned suggest that Willy
 - (A) often comes home early.
 - (B) has had trouble recently.
 - (C) has recently had an automobile accident.
 - (D) is tired and in need of rest.
 - (E) has been trying to commit suicide.
2. All of the following are pieces of exposition supplied in the scene EXCEPT
 - (A) Willy is his company's representative in New England.
 - (B) Willy drives a Studebaker.
 - (C) Willy's mind wanders into the past.
 - (D) Biff has come home to see Bill Oliver.
 - (E) Happy accepts bribes from the manufacturers he deals with.
3. Biff's concern with Willy's audible ramblings indicates that he
 - (A) cares for his mother far more than for his father.
 - (B) was unaware that his father was in trouble.
 - (C) is grateful to be able to help them.
 - (D) blames Happy for not being more helpful.
 - (E) is embarrassed by his father's obvious dementia.
4. The audience learns all of the following from Biff and Happy's conversation EXCEPT
 - (A) Happy is a vacuous braggart.
 - (B) Biff has spent the past several years wandering from job to job.
 - (C) Biff greatly prefers active, outdoors work.
 - (D) Happy is a womanizer.
 - (E) Happy is rising rapidly in his company.
5. The majority of Biff and Happy's conversation is
 - (A) essential exposition.
 - (B) the introduction of the main conflict.
 - (C) the inciting incident.
 - (D) rising action.
 - (E) plot complication.

Practice Multiple Choice Questions 6 - 10

Carefully read the first flashback, beginning with “Biff: Whatta ya got, Dad?” and ending with the stage direction, “*The leaves are gone. It is night again...*”

6. The primary character trait of Willy’s displayed in this scene is his
 - (A) devotion to his sons.
 - (B) lying.
 - (C) love of his wife.
 - (D) confidence.
 - (E) integrity.
7. Each of the following foreshadows future trouble for the Lomans EXCEPT
 - (A) Biff has stolen a football.
 - (B) Biff is in danger of failing math.
 - (C) Willy does not make enough money to meet their expenses.
 - (D) Willy values appearances more than substance.
 - (E) Happy is athletically talented.
8. When the Woman in Boston intrudes in the flashback, the tone of the flashback changes from
 - (A) idyllic to frenetic.
 - (B) optimistic to pessimistic.
 - (C) sanguine to volatile.
 - (D) idyllic to sanguine.
 - (E) choleric to pessimistic.
9. Biff’s promise to make a touchdown for Willy suggests that he is
 - (A) a show-off.
 - (B) an exceptional football player.
 - (C) desperate for his father’s attention.
 - (D) Willy’s favorite son.
 - (E) the team’s most valuable player.
10. Miller’s purpose in introducing Bernard is to
 - (A) provide comic relief.
 - (B) establish a foil for Biff.
 - (C) supply plot exposition.
 - (D) introduce a new conflict.
 - (E) provide the inciting incident.

Practice Multiple Choice Questions 11 - 15

Carefully read the scene in Act Two in which Willy visits Charley's office, beginning with the stage direction, "*Light rises on the right side of the forestage, on a small table in a reception room of Charley's office,*" and ending with the stage direction, "*Charley stares after him a moment and follows,*" and then answer the questions that follow.

11. What important exposition does the audience learn in this scene?
 - (A) Bernard is going to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court.
 - (B) Willy believes he is worth more dead than alive.
 - (C) Biff disappeared from the neighborhood for a month after failing math.
 - (D) Biff had originally planned to go to summer school.
 - (E) Bernard always blamed Willy for Biff's failure.
12. Willy's exchange with Jenny can best be described as
 - (A) jovial.
 - (B) professional.
 - (C) crass.
 - (D) desperate.
 - (E) aloof.
13. Charley indicates that the primary difference between Willy and Bernard is the difference between
 - (A) planning and execution.
 - (B) teaching and learning.
 - (C) prosperity and poverty.
 - (D) celebration and deliberation.
 - (E) boasting and acting.
14. What does Charley point out is the great irony in Willy's life?
 - (A) Willy believes he is worth more dead than alive.
 - (B) Biff is a failure while Bernard is a success.
 - (C) Willy is a salesman and does not know that only material things matter.
 - (D) Willy has a job that does not pay him.
 - (E) Charley is Willy's only friend, but Willy does not respect him.
15. What is the psychological significance of Willy's conversation with Charley?
 - (A) Willy tells the truth for the only time in the entire play.
 - (B) Charley admits that he does not really like Willy.
 - (C) Willy admits that he has always been jealous of Charley.
 - (D) Charley realizes that Willy plans to kill himself.
 - (E) Charley knows that Willy will never pay him back.

Practice Multiple Choice Questions 16 - 20

Carefully read the scene in Act Two that takes place in the restaurant, beginning with Willy's entrance ("Willy: Gee, I haven't been here in years!") and ending with Stanley's finding Willy in the men's room.

16. What single detail of his father's infidelity bothers Biff the most?
 - (A) Willy claimed the woman was a buyer.
 - (B) Willy gave the woman Linda's stockings.
 - (C) Willy claimed to be lonely.
 - (D) Biff thought Willy could help.
 - (E) Biff had mocked his math teacher.
17. What does Biff verify for the audience when he says to Willy, "I don't know who said it first but..."
 - (A) He's not certain whether Biff or Willy caused the fight in Boston.
 - (B) He has sacrificed his life for the sake of maintaining Willy's lies.
 - (C) He and Willy are both liars and both know it.
 - (D) Biff was only a shipping clerk for Bill Oliver, not a salesman.
 - (E) Biff has finally remembered missing pieces from his past.
18. All of the following exasperate Biff while trying to tell Willy of his meeting with Oliver except
 - (A) Willy wants to hear unembellished facts.
 - (B) Willy constantly interrupts with optimistic interpretations.
 - (C) Happy insists on bolstering Willy's delusions.
 - (D) Willy's mind wanders to the past.
 - (E) Happy is oblivious to the danger Willy is in.
19. The flashback to Boston explains all of the following about Biff and Willy's relationship except
 - (A) Willy's insistence that Biff is a failure out of spite.
 - (B) Biff's obviously caring more for his mother than for Willy.
 - (C) Willy's ambivalence: Biff is godlike, Biff is a bum.
 - (D) Biff's unwillingness to lie to or for Willy.
 - (E) Biff's propensity to steal.
20. How does this scene establish that Happy and Biff really are Willy's sons?
 - (A) They both willingly desert the truth in favor of lies.
 - (B) They drink heavily in the restaurant.
 - (C) The boys act like showoffs in front of their father and Stanley.
 - (D) The boys desert their father and leave with women.
 - (E) They tell nothing but lies to each other and to Willy.

Practice Multiple Choice Questions 21 - 25

Carefully read the Requiem before answering the following questions.

21. All of the following foreshadow Happy's coming to an end like Willy's EXCEPT
 - (A) "Happy: There was no necessity for it. We would have helped him."
 - (B) "Biff: He had the wrong dreams... Happy: Don't say that."
 - (C) "Happy: I'm not licked that easily. I'm staying right in this city."
 - (D) "Happy: I'm gonna show you ... that Willy Loman did not die in vain."
 - (E) "Biff: I know who I am kid."
22. What is the significance of Charley's speech to Biff about the life of a salesman?
 - (A) He explains that Willy's difficulties were typical of salesmen.
 - (B) He denies that Willy would have been happier as a carpenter.
 - (C) He encourages Biff to embrace his dream.
 - (D) He justifies the American capitalistic way of life.
 - (E) He mocks the image of success that Willy tried to attain.
23. Linda is unable to cry most likely because
 - (A) her grief is tempered by her joy at paying off the house.
 - (B) she is relieved that Willy's suffering is over.
 - (C) the finality of Willy's death does not seem real to her.
 - (D) she is bitter that Willy chose to end his life the way he did.
 - (E) Willy was unfaithful to her while he was alive.
24. What is ironic about the fact that Linda has paid off the mortgage on the house?
 - (A) Willy knew he was worth more dead than alive, and she used his insurance money to pay the mortgage.
 - (B) Earlier, they'd complained that they'd worked to pay off the house and now there was no one to live in it.
 - (C) Everyone knew that Willy would have been a happier man building houses.
 - (D) Linda will probably move now that Willy is dead.
 - (E) Willy built the house and should not have had to mortgage it.
25. In the end, Miller portrays Linda as
 - (A) a loving and grieving widow.
 - (B) renewed and refreshed by optimism.
 - (C) finally sympathetic to Biff's plight.
 - (D) in complete denial about Willy's lies and misplaced values.
 - (E) a willing participant in her husband's delusions.

Answers With Explanations

1. If Willy came home early frequently (A), Linda would have no cause for alarm. (B) is tempting, but too vague. (D) is true of Willy's returning home, but not of Linda's questions. (E) is true, and we learn this soon, but is not explicitly suggested by (E). **(C) is indicated by Linda's first asking, "What happened?" and almost immediately asking, "Did you smash the car?" Clearly this has happened in the recent past, and is the first possibility she conceives of.**
2. (A) is established by Willy's saying : "I'm the New England Man. I'm vital in New England." (B) is established by Linda's "Maybe it's the steering again. I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker." Willy admits to (C) when he tells Linda he thought he was driving with the windshield open, and Happy admits (E) to Biff. **Only (D) is not true. Since he is home, Biff decides he will go see Oliver, but this is not the reason he originally came home.**
3. **(A) is established as the correct answer by the fact that Biff never considers what is behind his father's rambling (B).** He is in no position to help (C) and he does express displeasure with Happy (D), but Happy admits to being embarrassed (E). **Biff does, however, twice express concern that Linda can hear Willy.**
4. (A) through (D) are all established by the brothers' conversation while they are in bed. **(E) is blatantly untrue.**
5. A great deal of information is revealed in the conversation—how Biff has been spending the past ten years, the nature of Happy's job, etc.—but the plot of the play is not advanced in any substantial way. **Thus (A) is the only possible answer.**
6. (A) and (C) are suggested by Willy's conversations with his sons and with Linda, but **(B) is made clearer by the lies Willy tells Linda about the amount of money he has earned, which then calls into question every one of Willy's other boasts.** (E) is eliminated by Willy's lies and (D) by his confession to Linda that people do not seem to take to him. **Thus (B) is the correct answer.**
7. (A) through (D) are all suggested in this scene and will grow in significance as the plot of the play develops. (E), **however, is untrue. Happy is clearly in Biff's shadow and uses attempts at athleticism to gain his father's approval.**
8. The flashback begins with an idealistic remembrance of one of Willy's triumphal returns from a sales trip. He has gifts for the boys, Linda is happy to see him, and the car is clean and shined. Even the problems alluded to—Biff's imminent failure in math and Willy's poor sales—are glossed over. But when the Woman intrudes, suddenly, Biff's popularity becomes a roughness with the girls, and his failure looms loud and dangerous. The closing tone is more than pessimistic (B), while the opening mood is lighter than sanguine (C). (D) does not indicate a major change in mood. Nor does (E). **(A) is the correct answer.**

9. Biff may or may not be an exceptional player (B) and the team's most valuable player (E), but neither would require a break-out, showboat play. He certainly has his father's attention (C). Happy, if anyone, is desperate for it. (D) is tempting, but the act shows more Biff's affection for his father than Willy's for Biff. **Happy tells Biff, however, that he is supposed to pass instead of run for the touchdown, and Biff ignores what the coach feels is best for the team. Clearly he is a show-off, making (A) the best answer.**
10. While this first flashback takes on a lighter tone, there is no real comic relief (A). (C) and (D) are tempting, but not the most important functions of Bernard in this scene. (E) is simply not true. **Bernard, however, serves as a perfect foil for Biff (B). He is unpopular and unathletic. He is bookish and concerned with following rules. He is, in short, a near opposite of Biff, and the audience will see the end result of Bernard's not being "well liked" before the end of the play.**
11. **All along, the audience is led to believe that, upon failing math, Biff simply rolled over and died. This is the first we learn that Biff actually registered for summer school and then went to Boston to see Willy. Thus (D) is the correct answer.** We do learn (A), but this is present information, not plot exposition. Likewise, Willy does assert (B), but this is a current development, not exposition. (C) is tempting, but not as significant as (D). (E) is untrue. Willy asks Bernard if he blames Willy, but we do not learn of any such blame.
12. While the exchange—at least on Willy's end—might seem jovial, (A) is eliminated by the fact that Jenny must send Bernard out into the hall to deal with Willy. (B) is clearly eliminated by the fact that Willy is (again) babbling about the past and overly friendly with Jenny. (E) is clearly inaccurate, and (D) is true of Willy's conversation with Charley, not Jenny. **Willy, however, makes several crude comments ("Working? Or still honest?" "Jenny: How are you feeling? Willy: Not much anymore!"). Thus (C) is the correct answer.**
13. Bernard merely tells Willy that he is going to Washington, D.C., on business. Charley later tells Willy that his son will be arguing before the Supreme Court. When Willy comments that Bernard didn't mention it, Charley replies, **"He don't have to [mention it]—he's going to do it."** This is in contrast to Willy's always insisting that Biff's "big deal" is just around the corner. **Thus (E) is the correct answer.**
14. Charley counters Willy's claim that he's worth more dead than alive by saying, "Willy, nobody's worth nothin' dead;" he does *not* agree and points out the irony of the situation (A). Nor does Charley make any significant mention of Bernard's success (B). (D) is tempting, but is a present matter, not a "great irony." And Willy comments that Charley is his only friend (E). **The only plausible answer is (C), when Charley is once again surprised by Willy's misplaced values, thinking that sentiment—naming the baby—counts more than achievement (C).**

15. While (B), (C), (D), and (E) are all true, they are not significant psychological developments in the play. **When Willy admits, tearfully, that Charley is his only friend, however, Willy seems to have made a significant realization (A) that might have an impact on the rest of the action of the play.**
16. The one comment Biff makes—and then he finally breaks into tears—is, “You —you gave her Mama’s stockings.” Earlier in the play, Biff’s only concern about Willy’s loud babbling was the effect it must be having on Linda. **Thus (B) is indicated as the best choice.**
17. Earlier, Biff says to Happy, “How...did I ever get the idea that I’d been a salesman for him,” confirming for the audience that the *factual* past was not as the family presently remembers or relates it. Moreover, on some level they have always known that the **past was not what they claim. Thus (C) is the correct choice.** The audience does not yet know what happened in Boston (A), and his vagabond life has been his attempt to get away from Willy’s lies, not maintain them (B). (D) is true, but this is what the audience now discovers, not what we suspected and is now verified. And the issue in the play is intentional lying, not amnesia, repression, or any other psychological disorder (E).
18. All of the choices are true in the scene except (A). Willy does not want facts. He wants good news to take home to Linda, and he wants to be able to believe the fantasy he has spent his life creating.
19. The spite (A) would be the result of Biff’s learning that his father had been unfaithful to his mother. (B) is also the result of Biff’s learning that, while his mother sacrificed and mended stockings, Willy gave them liberally to the Woman. (C) is the natural result of the position Willy is now in. Biff has potential, and the possibility that Willy caused him to squander it is too painful for Willy. **Only (E) is not explained by Biff’s discovery of Willy in Boston. Biff had already acquired the habit of stealing and was alternately encouraged and chastised by Willy.**
20. (A) and (C) are both tempting, but are not the *best* choices. (B) is suggested, but Biff arrives already slightly inebriated, and we see them order only one round of drinks during this scene. (E) is eliminated by the fact that, throughout the scene, Biff is earnestly trying to get the truth to his father. **(D) is the best choice as it is a significant action that shows the boys to be disloyal and womanizers. Just as Willy was discovered in his infidelity, giving his wife’s stockings to the woman in Boston, Willy’s sons desert their father in a men’s room and leave with the women.**

21. Throughout the Requiem, Happy refuses to see that Willy, like his sons, was more cut out to work in the outdoors creating things with his hands, and that the American Dream of business success was the wrong dream for him. He insists in (B), (C), and (D) that he is going to take up the gauntlet he believes Willy has laid for him. (A) illustrates that Happy still denies the reality of the sons' own misplaced values and unwillingness and inability to help their parents financially. (E), **however, focuses on Biff's realization and probable future freedom, not on Happy's probable doom.**
22. Earlier in the Requiem, Charley says, "He was a happy man with a batch of cement," thus eliminating (B). (C) is ambiguous: does Charley encourage Biff to embrace Biff's dream? Willy's dream? (D) is tempting, but **the speech is more about the life of a salesman and the salesman's reliance on appearances** than on a broader social philosophy. (E) is eliminated by the fact that, if anything, Charley offers an apologetic for the type of success Willy strove for. **Thus, (A) is the only reasonable choice.**
23. She questions Willy's motives and expresses perhaps an intensified grief at having paid off the house on the same day as Willy's funeral, thus eliminating (A). Nothing in the text supports (B). (D) is tempting, but the text more specifically supports another answer. (E) is true, but not given as a reason for Linda's inability to cry. **She does say, however, "It seems to me you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you," thus making (C) the best choice.**
24. (A) is tempting. That Linda used Willy's insurance money is a common assumption but is not supported by the text. (C) is true, but has nothing to do with the mortgage money. There is nothing in the text to support (D), and (E) is an unsupported assumption based on the construction we do know Willy did to his house. **Thus, only (B) remains as a possible answer. In the first scene, Willy commented on the irony of working a lifetime to pay off a house only to have no one to live in it.**
25. (A) is eliminated by Linda's closing speech. (B) is slightly tempting, but there is no sense of joy in Linda's claiming that they are now "free and clear." Throughout the play, she has always been sympathetic to Biff (C). (E) is too strong a condemnation. Throughout the play, she has played along with Willy's lies and delusions, but has not necessarily joined in them. **Her inability to understand why no one has come to the funeral, however, suggests that she is—and has been—in denial about who and what Willy was (D).**

Death of a Salesman

Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Teaching Unit

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ACT I

1. What is the first sensory image Miller creates for the reader?

Miller opens the play with flute music, which he describes as telling of “grass and trees and the horizon.”

2. How does Miller visually introduce the motif of enclosed versus open spaces?

The set, when first seen by the audience, is described as the Salesman's house surrounded on all sides by tall, angular shapes.

3. What tone is set by the description of the opening of the play? How is this tone established?

The tone is dreamlike, but somber. The apartment buildings are jagged and threatening compared to the fragile-looking house. The dark blue lighting of the ending night competes with the angry orange of the sunrise. The stage directions indicate that the overall effect is like “a dream rising out of reality.”

4. At the beginning of the action, from where is Willy returning? What is unusual about this homecoming?

Willy is returning from a sales trip to New England. This is unusual because he left just this morning and was not expected home for several days.

5. What is it about Biff that upsets Willy?

Biff is thirty-four years old, and he has not yet settled into a career. He has been gone for over ten years and has yet to have a job in which he made even thirty-five dollars a week.

6. What is suggested by the way Linda talks about the boys getting ready for their date?

The audience gets the impression that Biff and Happy no longer live at home but have returned home for some reason.

7. What did Willy ask Biff that morning that Biff took as a criticism?

Willy asked whether Biff was “making any money.”

8. What problems in Willy’s life are we introduced to in this first scene?

Willy is no longer able to complete his sales trips to New England, so he will ask to be allowed to stay in New York.

There is some conflict between Willy and his son Biff that erupted in angry words that morning.

Willy cannot tolerate the way his neighborhood has changed, especially the apartment buildings that have been built surrounding his home, blocking out the sun and air.

9. What is the probable significance of Biff’s homecoming to the plot?

Biff’s homecoming is probably the inciting incident.

10. Why has Biff come home?

He thinks that whatever he has been doing out west has been wasting his life, and he has come home to begin building his future.

11. Happy confesses to what significant character flaws?

He sleeps with the fiancées of other executives. He accepts bribes from manufacturers and suppliers.

12. What is significant about the way Biff and Happy react to their father’s wandering mind and talking to himself?

Biff is more worried about the impact of Willy’s distress on Linda than on Willy himself. Happy is embarrassed by his father. Neither one seems to feel any sympathy for Willy, concern for what might be troubling him, or worry about what might be physically or mentally wrong with him.

13. How does Miller communicate the flashback to the audience?

Very slowly, even during the conversation in the “present,” the lighting begins to change. The apartment houses disappear. Open spaces with leaves appear. Also, gradually, the focus of Willy’s attention and his tone of voice change. He is no longer muttering to himself or to an empty chair in which he might believe he sees Biff, but he is speaking, full volume, to an offstage Biff. When Biff and Happy enter, they are younger, and the flashback has begun.

14. What might the act of washing and waxing the car symbolize?

The automobile, of course, quickly became the symbol of post-war affluence in the United States. Keeping it clean and shined keeps the focus on outward appearance, rather than on the power or function of the car.

15. What is significant about Willy's justification of Biff's theft of the football?

At first, Willy is ready to reprimand Biff, but he quickly changes his mind and calls the theft "initiative." This will be a recurring theme, Willy's willingness to cut corners, to excuse away inappropriate behavior, to encourage theft and lying, all in the name of being "personally attractive," "well-liked," and successful.

16. What are some of the lies and contradictions we catch Willy in during this flashback?

Willy lies about how much he sold on the trip. He starts out by claiming to have sold five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston (total: twelve hundred gross). Eventually, he admits that his sales total for the entire trip is a mere two hundred gross.

One second he is criticizing the refrigerator and the next praising it. This is also true of the Chevrolet. Early in the scene, it is "the greatest car ever built." Before the end of the scene, Willy complains, "they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!"

In his conversation with the boys, Willy suggests that the people in his world treat him with great respect, but his conversation with Linda contradicts this.

17. What is significant about the basis on which Linda and Willy chose the refrigerator they bought?

It had the "biggest ads." They apparently did not research brands or reliability only looked at the promises of American consumerism.

18. What is the significance of the exchange with the Woman?

- 1. We know that Willy is having an affair, and this makes him already less likeable, less a hero in the audience's eyes.*
- 2. Willy gives away stockings while Linda, always trying to save money, mends hers.*
- 3. The Woman, obviously a receptionist, promises to put Willy "right through to the buyers," which is how Willy believes a salesman's living is made—not by pounding the pavement, but by manipulating people and trying to gain some sort of preferential treatment.*

19. How does the tone of the flashback change after Willy “returns” from the hotel room in Boston.

Before it was idyllic—boys tossing footballs, washing the car, dad home from a trip and giving gifts. Suddenly the reverie takes on the tone of a nightmare. Linda’s mending stockings spurs Willy’s guilt. Bernard rushes in with the news that Biff is failing. The adoring father becomes a punitive disciplinarian. The “most popular boy” is described as being “too rough” with the girls, etc.

20. At this point, what opportunities and dangers are in front of Biff? What might they foreshadow?

He has three college scholarship offers, but he is in danger of failing math. Given what we know of Biff’s present, we might assume that Biff does indeed fail math, does not graduate from high school, or go to college.

21. Who is Ben and what does Willy think of him? What does Ben represent for Linda?

Ben is Willy’s older brother. Willy idolizes him, and, for Willy, he represents lost opportunity. For Linda, Ben represents a force that would pull Willy away from home and make him dissatisfied.

22. What is significant about the fact that Ben is dead? How might the recent news of his death serve as another inciting incident?

Being dead, Ben can only be idealized. He can never be a failure. We are tempted to wonder whether Willy is remembering his brother and their exchanges accurately.

Since Ben’s success—and the fact that Willy passed up the chance to join his brother’s venture—haunts Willy, the arrival of the news of Ben’s death only weeks before the beginning of the play, like Biff’s homecoming, could be one of the triggers for the crisis that will occur in the play.

23. What is ironic about how Willy talks about his brother’s success? How does this suggest a major theme of the play?

Willy attributes Ben’s success to the fact that he “knew what he wanted and went out and got it!” We slowly come to learn that Willy does not know what he wants or how to get it.

24. What do we learn about Willy’s salary?

He is paid only commissions but no salary. Since a commission is a percentage of sales, falling sales result in little or no income for Willy.

25. What is significant about the auto accidents that Willy has had?

Linda tells the boys that the accidents were not accidents. Willy, she says, was trying to kill himself.

26. What is the probable use for the piece of rubber hose that Linda found?

Presumably, Willy made it so that he might attach it to the gas heater and then inhale the gas.

27. Why won't Linda remove it so that Willy cannot follow through on his intention?

Linda cannot confront Willy with the knowledge that she knows the truth behind all of his lies and bravado.

28. What does Linda mean when she says, "Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person"? How realistic is such a line from a character in a play like this?

This is an example of an unrealistic, stylized, expressionist line. Arthur Miller is using Linda to begin to make his case for a common man's being a tragic hero. More than the individual Linda telling her sons that they must begin to pay attention to their father, the playwright is telling his audience that men like Willy must be the focus of attention just as royalty and celebrities are.

29. How likely is it that Bill Oliver will remember Biff the way Biff believes he will be remembered?

It is highly unlikely that Oliver will remember Biff well and kindly. We have already seen that none of the characters remembers the past accurately. Any current mention of past glory is more than likely either an exaggeration or an outright lie.

30. What is plot point one that ends Act I and thrusts the characters into Act II? On what note of suspense, intense hope, or impending doom does the act end?

The mood is high, and everyone is hopeful. Willy will talk to Howard about staying in New York, and, given his "track record," Howard will definitely give Willy what he needs. By the same token, Biff will meet with Bill Oliver and is almost guaranteed the loan to establish his own business.

Of course, none of the characters remembers or relates the past accurately. They exaggerate and lie. They build their hopes on illusion, so there is as much doubt as there is hope.

Act II

1. What is the source of the optimism at the beginning of this act?

Willy is optimistic because he plans to ask Howard for an office job to get off the road. Willy and Linda are both happy because Biff is going to ask Oliver for a loan. Linda sums up their optimism when she says, "It's changing, Willy, I can feel it changing."

2. The scene with Howard, Willy, and the tape recorder goes on for nearly two pages. What is the purpose of this scene?

The scene establishes many things: Howard is clueless to Willy's human need.

Willy is proven to be a liar. His version of the past and his value to the company is very different from Howard's. We also again see that what Willy values are not the things that are truly important. He remembers the conversation with Howard's father as much more significant than it actually was ("I named you Howard!") But even if he remembered it accurately, that alone would not be the basis for Willy's status with the company today.

3. What purpose does Howard serve for the audience?

Howard is an objective outsider against which we can evaluate the inaccuracies of Willy's memories.

4. What does Dave Singleman represent for Willy?

Dave Singleman is Willy's idealized version of himself, a man with such personal attractiveness that he need not work to earn his living.

5. How accurately do you suppose Willy is remembering Dave Singleman? What is significant about Singleman's name?

Based on what we already know about how Willy reinvents his past, we must assume that Willy's memories are not accurate. Singleman's name probably indicates that he sacrificed home and family—was a single man—in order to reach the point where he could make his living from his hotel room.

6. How might Willy's comparing himself to an orange be interpreted as a criticism of the capitalistic system?

The one rule of the capitalist system is profit. Willy may have put thirty-four years into his company, but if he can no longer generate income for them, he is no longer needed. Willy insists that he has value as a person that transcends his net profit or loss.

7. Judging from what Bernard says, what took the life out of Biff? What about Bernard irks Willy?

Whatever happened in Boston between Biff and Willy is at the root of their conflict. Willy feels his sons are failures, but Bernard, nearly Biff's age and taunted as a youth, is now a highly successful lawyer.

8. What important exposition do we learn from Bernard?

We learn that Biff was not defeated by failing math. The math teacher did not ruin Biff's life as Willy always insisted.

9. What is the purpose of the scene between Stanley and Happy and then between Happy and the girl?

These scenes serve to further develop Happy's character as an irresponsible, pleasure-seeking skirt-chaser.

10. What is significant about the way Biff's meeting went with Bill Oliver?

Again, we are reminded of how the Lomans do not remember the past at all accurately. Biff realized that Oliver had no idea who he was. He had been a shipping clerk and had been fired for stealing.

11. List the complications that have been added to the Act-1 inciting incidents and carry the plot toward an imminent climax.

Willy cannot travel anymore. Instead of being assigned to New York City or being given an advance on his pay, Willy is fired. The sons have no prospects. Nothing in the past was the way they claim to remember it.

12. What suspense still lingers as we mount toward an obvious climax?

What happened in Boston? Why did Biff give up his prospects of going to the University of Virginia?

13. The climax of the play will obviously have something to do with the characters' finally giving up their illusions and facing the truth of the past. Who seems to be the character who is going to make this happen?

Rather than being discouraged by his "meeting" with Bill Oliver, Biff seems energized and inspired. He wants to share his realization with his father; destroy the stranglehold the past has on them and enter a new and hopeful future.

14. How do Willy and Happy prevent him from doing this?

Willy desperately wants to hear good news, not bad news, so he keeps interrupting. Happy, already beginning to follow in his father's fatal footsteps, lies about the meeting.

15. How does this final flashback represent the convergence of plotlines in climax?

Willy's being fired is the climactic moment of his sales career. He cannot lie his way out of this reality. At the same time, meeting Bernard forces Willy to some reevaluation of his definition of success and his notions of how success is achieved. The failure of Biff's meeting does likewise. Now, with the flashback of Biff in Willy's room in Boston we learn the answers to the questions that have been before us since the beginning of the first act: the cause of the bitterness between Biff and Willy, and why Biff simply gave up, even after he'd already made arrangements to go to summer school.

16. What is the lowest point of the sons' relationship with their father?

Their leaving the restaurant with the woman while Willy is babbling in the men's room is the lowest point in their relationship.

17. What do the seeds and Willy's "planting" a "garden" represent?

From the very beginning of the play, Willy has complained about being closed in—literally by the apartment buildings that have been built around the house, and figuratively by the web of lives the family has woven. Earlier, Willy complained that the land was barren and "you couldn't even grow a carrot." Now the seeds and the midnight planting represent the futility of Willy's misplaced values and efforts.

18. What occurs in the absolute moment of climax that determines this play will be a tragedy?

Biff makes his final effort at a breakthrough with Willy. They finally confront the truth, but ultimately Willy does not get it.

19. What is the guaranteed, "gilt-edged" proposition to which Willy refers?

If he kills himself, his life insurance policy will pay \$20,000.

20. What is the plot point that ends Act II and thrusts us into the Requiem?

We hear the sound of a car driving away, the family screams, and we know that Willy is going to kill himself.

21. What do we realize is the irony of the title of the play?

Willy had used the term the "death of a salesman" to describe Dave Singleman's "noble" death. Now we know that the title refers to Willy's death.

Requiem

1. What is a requiem? Why is this section called a Requiem?

A requiem is a mass for the dead. The word requiem comes from the Latin requiēs, which means “rest.”

2. Are we surprised that no one has come to the funeral? Why or why not?

We are not...nothing Willy claimed about his past was true, nothing he told his family...so why would we have believed his stories about how well-liked he was?

3. What does Biff mean when he says of his father, “He had all the wrong dreams. All, all wrong”?

Willy’s dreams were of business success, especially the success he thought could be attained through the power of a salesman’s personality. Biff knows that Willy’s talent was in his hands. Something in Willy could not appreciate the value of hard work, whether it was pounding the pavement to make sales or the physical labor of construction and farming. Looking at the apparently easy lifestyle of Dave Singleman—which was probably the result of years of hard work—Willy saw only the benefits of success without understanding what lay behind it.

4. What is ironic about Linda’s wondering why no one came to the funeral?

Throughout the play, Linda was the only character who consistently knew the truth. She knew that Willy’s sales never equaled his claims. She knew of Willy’s inability to continue working, and she was also the one aware of her sons’ essential worthlessness. She knew the truth of Willy’s previous suicide attempt. Of all people, she should be least surprised that no one would attend the funeral.

5. What does the ending of the play suggest is in store for Happy?

Happy is going to live his father’s dream and presumably, he will make the same mistakes because he has the same distorted values.

Death of a Salesman

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ACT I

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5. What is it about Biff that upsets Willy?
6. What is suggested by the way Linda talks about the boys getting ready for their date?

7. What did Willy ask Biff that morning that Biff took as a criticism?
8. What problems in Willy's life are we introduced to in this first scene?
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11. Happy confesses to what significant character flaws?
12. What is significant about the way Biff and Happy react to their father's wandering mind and talking to himself?
13. How does Miller communicate the flashback to the audience?
14. What might the act of washing and waxing the car symbolize?
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16. What are some of the lies and contradictions we catch Willy in during this flashback?
17. What is significant about the basis on which Linda and Willy chose the refrigerator they bought?
18. What is the significance of the exchange with the Woman?
19. How does the tone of the flashback change after Willy “returns” from the hotel room in Boston.
20. At this point, what opportunities and dangers are in front of Biff? What might they foreshadow?
21. Who is Ben and what does Willy think of him? What does Ben represent for Linda?
22. What is significant about the fact that Ben is dead? How might the recent news of his death serve as another inciting incident?
23. What is ironic about how Willy talks about his brother’s success? How does this suggest a major theme of the play?

24. What do we learn about Willy's salary?
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2. The scene with Howard, Willy, and the tape recorder goes on for nearly two pages. What is the purpose of this scene?
3. What purpose does Howard serve for the audience?
4. What does Dave Singleman represent for Willy?
5. How accurately do you suppose Willy is remembering Dave Singleman? What is significant about Singleman's name?
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4. What is ironic about Linda’s wondering why no one came to the funeral?
5. What does the ending of the play suggest is in store for Happy?

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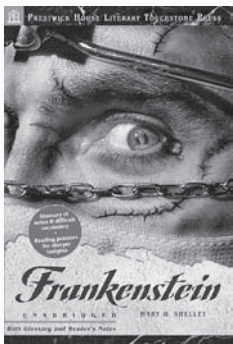
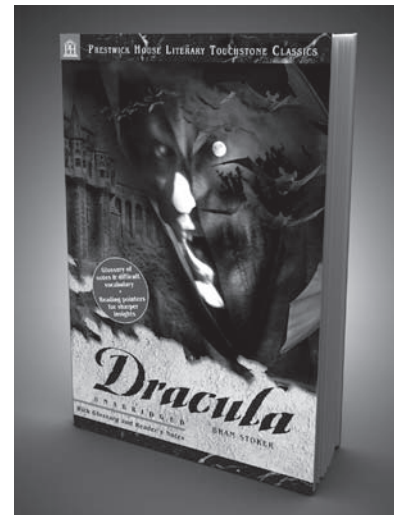
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