Arthur Miller:

- Born in New York in October, 1915 into a Jewish-Polish family.
- During the Great Depression (1929) 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 house in *Death of a Salesman*.
- Miller was a hard worker as a teen: he held multiple jobs to financially help his family—his family constantly struggled with money.
- On a mix of scholarship and his hard-earned money, Miller attended the University of Michigan, graduating with a degree in English in 1938. During his time at University, he was awarded a prize for play writing along with Tennessee Williams. <---Tennessee Williams is one of Miller's greatest inspirations; we will discuss him later on (his most famous play is *A Streetcar Named Desire*..."STELAAAAA!!!!!")
- He returned to New York and began a career writing for a radio broadcast.
- He married his college sweetheart in 1940 and they had two children; this marriage did not last very long, however—they were divorced within 5 years of marriage.
- While the majority of the male population at time was drafted into the US military (WWII), Miller was exempt due to a minor injury to his kneecap.
- Miller filled his romantic void by marrying THE Marilyn Monroe in 1956: the two worked often together in film/dramatic projects. Unfortunately, they were divorced in 1961.
- In 1957, Miller was brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and was called upon to explain his Communist tendencies while involved in the Federal Theater Project (as well as his other political activities). <---this was VERY common during the time (not much of a scandal)

- This project was a New Deal agency (relief, recovery, reform...created by Roosevelt) created to provide jobs in the theater.
- Congress became suspicious of the agency and closed it in 1939.
- *Fun Fact*: Marilyn Monroe accompanied Miller to his trial; she risked her own acting career to do so.

- He was convicted of contempt of court for refusing to name the names of other Communist activists--Miller received a $500 fine, 30 days in jail, & lost his passport.
- In 1962, he remarried to Inge Morath, a photographer on set of one of Miller's films: the two had 2 children and remained together until Inge's death in 2002.
- Arthur Miller died in February, 2005 of heart failure after a battle against cancer, pneumonia and congestive heart disease.

**Miller's Most Famous Works**

- *All My Sons* (1947): about a family coping with having a son listed as missing in action during WWII
- *Death of a Salesman* (1949): an examination of American life and consumerism
- *The Crucible* (1953): about witch-hunts in colonial Salem; implied a parallel with the McCarthy trials
- *A View from the Bridge* (1955): the self-discovery and fall of a Brooklyn dock worker questioning US immigration laws
• *After the Fall* (1964): explores an unhappy American marriage
• *The Last Yankee* (1991): follows the accounts of 2 couples within a mental institution
• *Finishing the Picture* (2005): autobiographical account of Miller & Monroe

**Terms to Know (we will explore these ideas while reading *Death of a Salesman*)**

- **consumerism**: social and economic order and ideology that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-greater amounts (purchasing goods and services in excess of their basic needs)
  - The consumer society emerged in the late 17th century, intensified during the 18th century, but is most attributed to the 18th & 20th century—AFTER the Great Depression
  - *Many claim consumerist growth & change was propelled by the growing middle-class who embraced new ideas about luxury consumption and the growing importance of fashion as an arbiter for purchasing rather than necessity.*
  - Others argue that consumerism was a political and economic necessity for the reproduction of capitalist competition for markets and profits.
  - People even argue consumerism arose from the increasing political strength of international working class organizations during a rapid increase in technological productivity, therefore creating an American culture based on therapeutic entertainment, home ownership, and debt.
  - The Industrial Revolution dramatically increased the availability of consumer goods (although it was still primarily focused on the capital goods sector and industrial infrastructure—i.e., mining, steel, oil, transportation networks, communications networks, industrial cities, financial centers, etc.).
  - The development of the department store represented a paradigm shift in the experience of shopping; for the first time, customers could buy an astonishing variety of goods—all in one place—and shopping became a popular leisure activity.
  - Henry Ford/Frederick Winslow Taylor's assembly line—cars (as well as other products) could be produced faster and at greater numbers.
    - **More** products were available at **cheaper** prices.
    - “**Keeping up with the Jones’.”**

- **The American Dream**: the idea of the American Dream is that, through a combination of hard work, courage, and determination, **prosperity** can be achieved. These values came to America with the early settlers and were passed on to later generations.
  - As the 20th Century drew closer, the "Dream" became that of **industry** and **capitalism** with men such as John D. Rockerfeller beginning life in humble conditions, but going on to control vast corporations and the fortunes that resulted (consumerism...)
  - Successes such as these suggested that talent, intelligence and a willingness to work hard were all that was needed to achieve the dream (money truly is not that important...is that how it is in today's society???)
  - America has always been perceived as a place where "the streets are paved with gold"; consequently, there are more legal immigrants to the US per annum than any other country in the world. They were (and are) drawn to work in the major cities such as New York, Chicago and Detroit.
  - During the 1920s and 1930s, the Great Depression was a cause of major hardship and seemed to be a reverse of the "Dream" which people had held dear for so long. (*TKAM*)
The end of WWII drew young American families to live in comfort and stability in the suburbs, living the life of a "perfect family"; however, the rise of the "hippy" values of the 1960s rejected this ideal—they did not kill it off entirely.

Some say The American Dream is misleading. It is impossible for everyone to gain prosperity simply through hard work and determination (do you agree with this?). The consequence of this is that those who do not achieve success believe that it is entirely their own fault.

- In addition, the poor are penalized as their poverty is seen by outsiders as "proof" of their laziness.
- The American Dream does not take account of the fact that the family and wealth are things that one is born into, as well as traits such as natural intelligence and appearance have a bearing on potential success in life (do you agree with this?)

--- NATURE VS. NURTURE

In Death of a Salesman, Miller shows The American Dream is superficial and meaningless; Fitzgerald does something similar in The Great Gatsby—he shows The American Dream is unattainable.

- tragic hero: originally defined by Aristotle—a character, usually male and of high social status, who experiences a “fall” (often death) because of a moral flaw
  - catharsis: the purging of emotions through art
  - tragic flaw/"hamartia": the internal flaw that leads to a tragic hero’s downfall
  - hubris: excessive pride

Death of a Salesman (1949) is often referred to as a DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

- Protagonist (Willy Loman) is socially inferior: he is NOT of high status; he begins "low" and falls even lower

“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

Realism

- Realism is an artistic movement that began in 19th century France.
- Realists seek to accurately portray everyday characters, situations, and dilemmas.
- Realist drama is a careful observation of human characteristics and the language attempts to be as close as possible to natural conversation.
- Contemporary costuming and three–dimensional sets are used so as to create a ‘lifelike’ stage picture.
- The plays are usually critiques of social problems.
- Famous realist dramatists are: Henrik Ibsen (A Doll's House), Anton Chekhov (The Cherry Orchard) and George Bernard Shaw (Pygmalion)

Expressionism

- A reaction to Realism, the Expressionist movement began in the early 1900s.
- Expressionist dramatists were concerned with presenting the inner psychological reality of a character---a subjective vision of the world as opposed
to an objective representation as Realism wanted--- why do people act the ways they do? What makes people "tick"?

- They were, as American Expressionist playwright Elmer Rice claimed, "... getting beneath reality, displaying more than reality, replacing reality with something more expressive."

- They threw out dramatic convention--plot, structure and characterization were abandoned, dialogue became poetic, and lighting was used to create atmosphere.

- Expressionism was successful mainly in Germany and Scandinavia, but American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill (The Iceman Cometh) and Thornton Wilde (Our Town) were also influenced.

- Miller was interested in Expressionism, but didn't want to abandon the conventions of realism. He used, like O'Neill, a dramatic form that combined THE SUBJECTIVITY OF EXPRESSIONISM with the ILLUSION OF OBJECTIVITY AFFORDED BY REALISM.

- The use of language in Death of a Salesman is entirely Realistic. Miller's dialogue is carefully constructed to follow the exact speech patterns of ordinary New Yorkers. It is very dense and fast, with repetitions, hesitations, and contradictions. The characters often use slang and clichés such as:

  - "Biff is a lazy bum," "You make mountains out of molehills," "I'm a dime a dozen," "You're a pal," "He's gonna flunk you," "I'm takin' one play for Pop"

- This seems simple and "easy," but it does require careful construction.

**Symbols to watch for...**

- **the jungle/woods** (life/risks of life)
- **diamonds** (success)
- **garden** (Willy's desire to make good for his family--garden used to grow before apartments were built--also represents Willy's failure)
- **stockings** (affair with The Woman--wife mends stockings while Willy gives The Woman new stockings--also a symbol of material wealth)
- **Happy/Biff's stealing** (represents their stolen identities--stolen by lies and the pursuit of the unachievable dream)
- **"falling"/"down"** (The words fall, falling and down and the movements they suggest re-appear again and again to emphasize the fall of Willy and his family. EX: Willy is described as 'beaten down' and he 'lies back, exhausted'; Willy also 'falls' into bed with the woman and she shouts at him to 'get up, get up'; When Biff leaves him in the hotel, Willy is on his knees; Biff is also going down -- when he steals the pen from Oliver's office he runs down 11 flights of stairs; When Willy has fallen down to his death, Linda lays flowers down at his grave.)
- **brand names** (heightens the realism of the play--EX: Studebaker, Hastings, Chevrolet, etc.--symbolizes the material status Willy strives for but cannot achieve--Willy is, at first, so proud of the Chevvy & refers to it as "the greatest car ever built," but when it goes wrong, he says, "they ought to prohibit the manufacturer of that car." Willy is duped by advertising into thinking that owning these things = success.)

Recurring Ideas in Death of a Salesman-->these build our themes

- Dreams: The American Dream, hopes and ambitions, daydreams, fantasies
- Parents and children/fathers and sons specifically
- Popularity and success
- Consumerist society and the dangers of capitalism
- The world of business
✓ Masculinity
✓ Depression
✓ Memory
✓ The past
✓ "The family"
✓ The role of women in society
✓ Illusion/disillusionment
✓ Responsibility
✓ Competition
✓ Technology
✓ **Failure** to adapt to modern society
✓ >>>music---motif (the flute)

**characters:**

- **Willy Loman:** **LO-MAN = LOW-MAN** (no salary; considered a "beginner"; trouble driving; can't rely on family; completely **lost...no sense of self**)
  - protagonist
  - traveling salesman in his 60s
  - because of the play's title, we know he is going to die at some point in the play (most likely the resolution)
  - experiencing emotional crisis throughout play: his **past** is interfering with his **present** ("episodes"); with each "episode," Loman discovers new information that causes him distress in the present; he realizes he has lived his whole life by **false standards** (one can lie & cheat to be successful...all that matters is being "well-liked")<---THE AMERICAN DREAM?

- **Biff Loman:** Willy's oldest son; attractive & powerful
  - 34 yrs. old during play...has just come home from farm work in the West
  - was a star athlete in high school--Willy thought he'd be a "star"& extremely successful in life; this would mean Willy was a good role model and raised him "right"
  - Biff, however, feels "mixed-up" & confused about his role/meaning in life; while he **seems** successful (he's moved to & worked on multiple farms), he has these experiences because he **steals**
  - Biff comes home to "figure things out" & find something "permanent"--he wants to find a solid job **OR** get married
  - Fights with father (Willy) @ home; Biff's return upsets Willy: we find out something happened between Willy/Biff while Biff was in high school--no one else knows about this incident, but it is obvious it changed their relationship
  - We (readers) see the romanticized version of Biff through Willy's eyes (Willy has trouble accepting the truth...); Willy has obviously favored Biff over his younger brother (Happy) and has caused Biff to believe the "rules" don't apply to him--Biff feels like he is better than everyone else in society
  - Biff is aware of his unhappiness (unlike his father) and knows he has not yet mentally matured into a man---**what will come of Billy at the resolution of the play?**

- **Happy Loman:** Willy's youngest son; also attractive & powerful; "happy-go-lucky"
  - 32 yrs. old--only 2 years younger than Biff
  - ignored by Willy in his younger years; we see Happy doing **anything** to get Willy's attention
• He has learned to say what people want to hear; however, he is almost invisible to both his parents; he is, therefore, callous toward both of them (@ times he even refuses to associate w/his father)
• On the outside, it seems Happy has achieved "The American Dream" ("wealth," an expensive apartment, social life, a car, etc.); however, we discover his job is not stable & he accepts/is guilty of bribery in order to succeed; he also seduces women to prosper in his career.
• Is Happy truly "happy"? Everything about his character is a facade; he is void of actual substance....Is Happy the next Willy?

• **Linda Loman: Willy's wife; model of a loving, devoted, patient wife**
  • Willy sometimes treats Linda cruelly; she forgives him
  • Linda ignores her own opinions & has become dedicated to supporting Willy
  • Linda represents reality, reason and truth; she is the only character who knows the true nature of her family's financial situation--she does not, however, want to destroy Willy's clouded vision
  • Linda becomes a mother-figure for Willy; she treats him like a child
  • Linda believes Willy deserves more respect--especially from their sons (represents Arthur Miller's attitude toward Willy)

• **Charley: Willy's neighbor; father of Biff's schoolmate**
  • large; unimpressive and unconcerned about any kind of appearance (appears first in pajamas & robe in middle of night)
  • Miller writes, “the most decent man in Death of a Salesman is...Charley whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's. The great difference between then is that Charley is not a fanatic. Equally, however, he has learned how to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of spirit which Willy chases to the end.”
  • Charley juxtaposes Willy--Charley is not concerned with others liking him; he does not have any interest in sports; he cannot use any tools; isn't obsessed with the business world (even though he is successful in business); not concerned with his family/sons
  • Charley lends Willy money$$
  • Charley is a realist

• **Bernard; Charley's son; successful lawyer**
  • regards Biff as a hero; wants him to succeed in life (ex: Bernard worries about Biff failing math in high school)
  • Quintessential "nerd"
  • Willy Loman has a hard time accepting Bernard's success (presents a trial @ The Supreme Court) because his own sons never amounted to anything

• **Ben; Willy's brother; a figment of his imagination**
  • The presence of Ben always signifies one of Willy's "daydreams."
  • Ben has recently died; successful business man who traveled to Africa/all over the globe
  • Ben represents true success and prosperity in Willy's eyes--Willy desperately craves this type of fame&fortune for his family (particularly his sons)
• **The Woman; unnamed; a mistress**
  * Willy cheats on his wife while Biff/Happy are in high school
  * Remember that "incident" btwn. Biff/Willy....?
  * Attention boost for Willy's fragile ego
  * This woman essentially ruins any relationship between Biff/Willy.
  * Why is she nameless?

• **Howard; Willy's boss**
  * Much younger than Willy (perhaps this signifies Willy's lack of success in life)
  * Willy "named him at birth" (friends with Howard's father); however, Howard does not respect Willy, talks to him condescendingly, & eventually fires him.

• **Stanley; waiter @ Frank's Chop House**
  * Seems to be friends with Happy (very similar character)
  * Banters back/forth w/Happy about 2 women

• **Miss Forsythe & Letta**
  * 2 young women Happy/Biff meet at dinner
  * Seems like they are prostitutes ("on call")