

Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/arthur-millers-death-salesman>.

Introduction

Death of a Salesman made its debut in 1949 and quickly became a success on the stage. It was the second triumph for playwright Arthur Miller, after *All my Sons* debuted in 1947.

Arthur Asher Miller was born in 1915 in New York City to a Jewish, Yiddish-speaking family. His family was affected by the Great Depression, but he was able to attend the University of Michigan where he began writing plays and won an award for his early work, and he eventually became one of America's most popular playwrights. He died in 2005.

While *Death of a Salesman* mentions nothing about Judaism and can be taught excellently without any mention of Jewishness, many critics and artists have seen something Jewish in the play—it's even been adapted into Yiddish. The resources in this kit will help students consider what, if anything, makes *Death of a Salesman* a Jewish text, and whether looking at it through a Jewish lens adds to our understanding of Miller's American classic.

Cover image: Miller in the Netherlands, September 28, 1966.

Subjects

Performance, Social Commentary, Theater

Reading and Background:

- Useful background information about the play can be found in Modern Theater Guides's *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* by Peter L. Hays with Kent Nicholson, 2008.
- It's interesting to compare a bio of Arthur Miller from [MyJewishLearning](#) with one from a secular site like [Encyclopedia Britannica](#), noticing the different emphases of each.
- *Timebends: A Life* is Miller's definitive memoir, and can provide insight into his upbringing, life, and career.

Resources

1: Text excerpt, George Ross's "Death of a Salesman in the Original," 1951.

Soon after it premiered, *Death of a Salesman* was translated into Yiddish by Joseph Buloff and subsequently performed by a Yiddish theater troupe. In this excerpt, actor and writer George Ross writes about his impressions of the Yiddish play.

Suggested Activity: Tell students about the performance of the play in Yiddish. Then, have them read the text above in small groups or as a class and discuss the following questions:

- (Check for understanding) In a sentence or two, summarize Ross's argument.
- What is your initial reaction to Ross's argument? Explain.
- Why do you think Ross claims that Miller might have "tried to ignore or censor out the Jewish part"? What could Miller have gained by doing so?

Then have students work individually or in small groups to select a short scene from the play and rewrite it as if the characters were Jewish. Consider: What language will you change? What will you add or take out? What makes a character or a family



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Jewish and how will you infuse that into the scene?

Source: George Ross, "Death of a Salesman in the Original," in *Commentary* (February 1951), 184.

2: Video excerpt, interviews with actors from the Yiddish revival of "Salesman," 2015.

The Yiddish version of *Death of a Salesman*, *Toyt fun a Salesman*, was revived and performed in 2015 by the New Yiddish Repertory Theater in New York. This interview with the two main actors from the production is in Yiddish with English subtitles.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video from 1:00 – 3:54, and have students discuss in pairs or as a group:

1. How does the actor Avi Hoffman see his character, Willy?
2. Do you agree with Hoffman that playing Willy in Yiddish requires "an entirely different way to think about this kind of character"?
3. At the end of the clip, Hoffman asserts that if Willy were a Jewish immigrant, it would make "him even more tragic...than he usually is." Do you agree with this claim? And, if so, why would a Jewish immigrant Willy be *more* tragic than the character as he was written?

This activity works well in conjunction with resource 1 of this kit.

Source: "A Talk with Avi Hoffman and Daniel Kahn." Interview by Boris Sandler. YouTube video. November 03, 2015. Accessed July 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tt-ucBeUNzk>.

3: Speech excerpt, Arthur Miller's "Concerning Jews Who Write," 1947.

Miller gave this speech at a dinner given in his honor by the Jewish Committee of Writers, Artists, and Scientists. This was two years before *Death of a Salesman* made its debut. In the first part of the speech, Miller explains why he doesn't write about Jews despite the fact that, in college, he wrote a Jewish play that "was a great success."

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt in small groups or as a class and discuss the following questions:

- (Check for Understanding): In your own words, summarize Miller's answer to, "Why didn't I go on writing about Jews?"
- Do you agree that "an innocent allusion to the individual wrong-doing of an individual Jew" would have been blown out of proportion and used against the Jews in 1947? Do you think this was a good reason to stop writing about Jews?
- Think about anti-Semitism in the world today. Could Miller's argument apply to the present moment? Why or why not?
- Based on this excerpt, how do you think Miller would respond to the comments of George Ross in resource 1 of this kit?

Writing activity: Write (and potentially give) a speech in Miller's voice responding to the Yiddish production of *Toyt fun a Salesman*. Include Miller's response to the George Ross review.

Source: Arthur Miller, "Concerning Jews Who Write," *Jewish Life* (March 1948), 7-10.

4: Video excerpt, interview with Arthur Miller, 2003.

This excerpt is from an interview Arthur Miller did with British actor, director, and television presenter Jonathan Miller, who interviewed six famous men on the topic of atheism. The BBC compiled these interviews into a series they called *The Atheism Tapes*.

Suggested Activity: Show students the interview beginning at 1:35 and ending at 6:22.

Before showing the clip, tell students that, while they watch, they should jot down anything Miller says that they find interesting, confusing, or controversial. After watching the clip, ask students to share what they noted.

Source: "Atheism Tapes Arthur Miller." *The Atheism Tapes* with Jonathan Miller. BBC. 2003. YouTube video, 28:55. May 4, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwk8F3UUZ-c>.

5: Poem, Erika Meitner's "Wal★Mart Supercenter," 2014.

This poem appears in Meitner's fourth book of poetry, *Copia*, published in 2014. It was originally published in *The Rumpus*, an online literature and culture magazine, in 2011.

Suggested Activity: Read the poem aloud twice as a class. The first time, have a different student read each stanza. The second time, have a different student read each sentence. Discuss:

- Why don't the stanzas and sentences (or the *lines* and sentences) match up? What effect does this have on the poem?
- Which lines do you think hold a lot of significance? Underline them, then share.
- What story is the writer telling? How is she telling it?
- Why does the author bring up the idea of mercy? What does that add to the poem?
- What do you think are the messages of the poem?
- How does the poem relate to the American Dream?
- How does the poem relate to *Death of a Salesman*? What does each text say about material goods, selling stuff, and America?

Then ask students to think about the associations they have with American stores, companies, or institutions *other* than Walmart. Think Starbucks, Gap, or the Red Sox. Ask students to pick one institution and write a poem in the style of Erika Meitner.

Source: Erika Meitner, "Wal★Mart Supercenter" from *Copia*. Copyright © 2014 by Erika Meitner. Used with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditions.org.

6: Poem excerpts, Allen Ginsberg's "America," 1956.

Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926 in New Jersey to Jewish parents. He was one of the central figures of the **Beat Generation**, a countercultural literary movement that included Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. Ginsberg wrote "America" in 1956, and it was published in his collection *Howl and Other Poems* later that year. You can listen to Ginsberg read "America" to an audience [here](#). Note that he adds lines in his performance that don't exist in the printed version of the poem.

Suggested Activity: Read the entire poem [here](#), and then focus in on the excerpts. Discuss:

- Why do you think the poet is speaking *to* America, rather than *about* America? Is he speaking to the country, the people, the government?
- What do you think Ginsberg means by "I am America"?
- How do these lines relate to *Death of a Salesman*?
- How do Ginsberg and Miller use different forms (poetry and drama, respectively) to comment on American society?

Creative Writing: If you could say anything *to* America, what would you say? Write a poem addressing America directly. Feel free to criticize, praise, or converse with America, and to ask America questions.

Source: Three excerpts - sixteen lines - from "AMERICA" FROM COLLECTED POEMS 1947-1980 by ALLEN GINSBERG. Copyright (c) 1956, 1959 by Allen Ginsberg. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

7: Article excerpt, David Mamet on why "Death of a Salesman" is Jewish, 2005.

David Mamet is a Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright and screenwriter, famous for works such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. In this 2005 [article](#) from *The Guardian*, Mamet makes the case that *Death of a Salesman* is indisputably a Jewish text, and that claiming it is "universal" is an act of appropriation by the dominant (non-Jewish) culture.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpts aloud with students and discuss:

- (Check for understanding.) In your own words, summarize the argument Mamet is making here.
- Do you agree that "the business, and the agony of assimilation" are specifically Jewish? And that the "struggle between hope, confusion, aspiration and circumstance," are specifically the topics of Jewish writers? Why or why not?
- In what ways might reading *Salesman* as a "universal" play be useful? In what ways might it be problematic?
- What does Mamet mean when he says that Allen Ginsberg's poem "America" (see resource 6 of this kit) is "a concise study guide to *Salesman*"? How could, as Mamet claims, the play be read as a response to the poem? Does it matter that the *Salesman* was written before "America"?

Source: David Mamet, "The human stain," *The Guardian*, May 6, 2005.
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/may/07/theatre.davidmamet>.