

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

**ARTHUR
MILLER**

DIRECTED BY
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 aNoiseWithin

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Death of a Salesman



Geoff Elliott by Daniel Reichert.

Play Synopsis

The year is 1949. The play takes place in **Willy Loman's house in Brooklyn, New York.** Throughout the play, **Willy moves back and forth in time**, with certain moments taking place elsewhere in New York City or Boston.

ACT 1

Willy Loman, a traveling salesman, returns home late one night, exhausted and distressed. **His wife, Linda**, attempts to calm Willy down, but he remains highly agitated. **Their adult sons, Biff and Happy**, who are visiting Willy and Linda, are awakened by the noise while sleeping in their boyhood room, and they discuss their parents and their own circumstances. Biff has worked in a number of jobs outside of New York, but none have lasted long, and **he is dissatisfied with his life and with himself**. Happy is employed, but **he is far more interested in chasing women**, and he appears to live in a state of constant denial as he repeatedly attempts to smooth over any family conflict. **As Willy talks to himself, slipping in and out of the past**, we learn more about the family's history and about the people who have been important to Willy: his **much older brother, Ben**, who discovered a diamond mine and died a rich man; Willy's **neighbor and only real friend, Charley**; and **Charley's son, Bernard**, whose intelligence and hard work the teenaged Biff and Happy used to ridicule. Willy moves outside and continues talking to himself, while his sons become very concerned by their father's behavior. Linda tells them of Willy's increasing despair and scolds them for neglecting him. Biff resolves to go speak with a family friend the next day to ask for a loan to get him started in setting up a new business; upon hearing this news, **Willy joyfully predicts that Biff will finally achieve the success that Willy has always thought him capable of achieving.**



Play Synopsis *continued*

ACT 2

The next morning Willy goes to see **his boss, Howard**, to ask whether he can stop traveling his sales routes to New England and remain in New York for work. Howard refuses, and Willy loses his temper, at which point **Howard fires him**. Willy is shattered, and **he is forced to confront the truth he has been avoiding**: that he is no longer the successful salesman he was (or that he believes he was). **Overwhelmed and terrified** at the prospect of financial ruin, which now seems inevitable, Willy goes to see Charley. At Charley's office he runs into **Bernard, now a highly successful lawyer** and a happily married father of two sons. Charley gives Willy some money (as he has been doing for a long time), and Willy leaves to meet Biff and Happy at a restaurant, where they have promised to meet him and take him to dinner. Biff's day has not gone well, though Willy refuses to accept this news. Furious, **Biff argues with Willy, who eventually strikes him**. Biff and Happy abruptly depart with two women they've picked up, leaving Willy behind, talking to himself in the bathroom. As the past overwhelms Willy, **we learn the reason behind Biff's estrangement from Willy and the source of the tension between them**. Later, when all three men have returned home, a wrenching scene takes place among the four family members as the hurt and betrayal from the last sixteen years comes pouring out. **Ultimately, Biff and Willy are able to share a moment of forgiveness and love** before Biff and Happy go upstairs, and Willy is at last able to release himself from the weight of his obligations and his guilt.

Interesting Fact

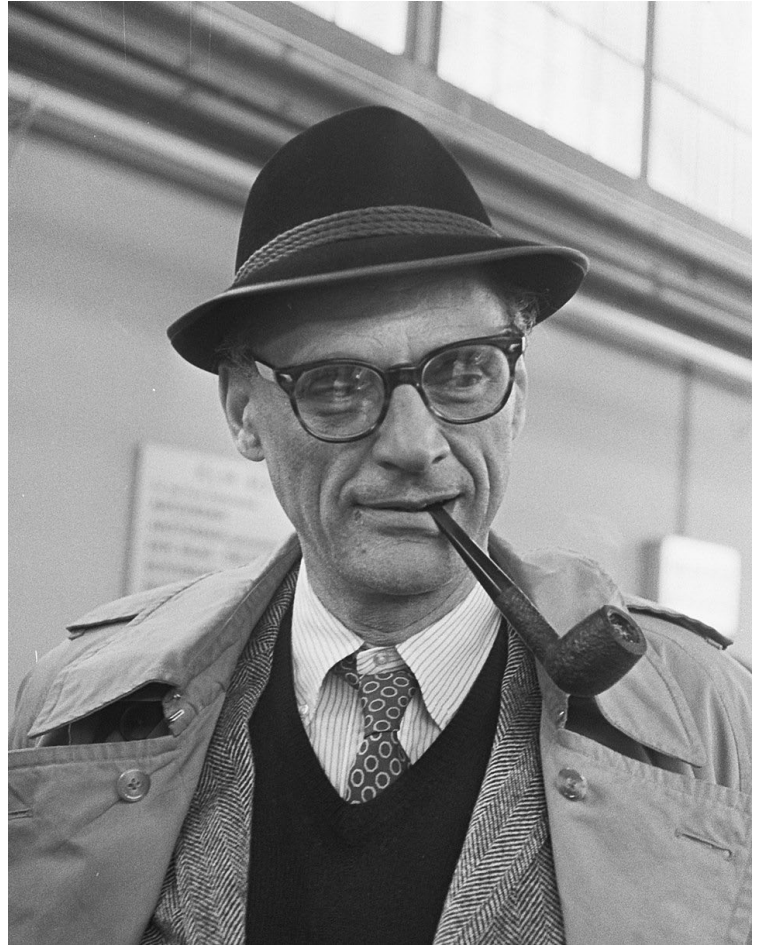
The morning after *Death of a Salesman* opened on Broadway, Bernard Gimbel—the owner of the large and hugely profitable Gimbel's department store in New York City—wrote a memo ordering that no Gimbel's employee was ever to be fired merely for getting old.

Gimbels Department Store, 1930s. Creative Commons.



Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller (1915–2005) was an American playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and essayist. Throughout his extraordinarily prolific career he wrote dozens of stage plays, radio shows, screenplays, novels, and essays. Miller's stage plays are considered by many to be among the best American dramatic works of the twentieth century. Many of Miller's most famous plays, including *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, are set in the time period in which Miller wrote them. These powerful and deeply moving plays depict the lives of everyday Americans during particular periods in history, and they simultaneously provide a commentary on the America that produced these individuals and contributed to their struggles.



Playwright Arthur Miller. Creative Commons.

Miller was born in New York to parents of Polish-Jewish descent. His father was a successful business owner who lost almost everything in the Stock Market Crash of 1929. During the Depression that followed, Young Arthur worked as a delivery boy every morning before school to help with his family's finances. He also worked a number of jobs to put himself through college at the University of Michigan, where he initially majored in journalism but then switched to English. After graduation, he moved back to New York and began writing plays. The first of Miller's plays to be produced, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), was a failure, but he achieved his first Broadway hit with *All My Sons*, which premiered in 1947. After that accomplishment, Miller was regarded as an established playwright, and his career took off.

When *Death of a Salesman* opened on Broadway in 1949 it was an immediate success. The play earned Miller a Pulitzer prize and won multiple Tony awards. It has been performed in many revivals, on Broadway and elsewhere. The play has also been adapted into numerous film and television versions, both in the U.S. and in other countries, and it has jump-started the careers of many young actors who have played Biff, such as John Malkovich, while many already famous actors, including Dustin Hoffman and Philip Seymour Hoffman, have

Arthur Miller *continued*

played Willy. As of 1999, the play had sold over 11 million copies; these sales figures were extraordinary for that time, and they led theater critic John Lahr to credit the play with being “probably the most successful modern play ever published.”

Part of Miller’s genius was his ability to write dramatic works that were deeply grounded in a particular time and place while simultaneously portraying common human dilemmas and emotions. This universal relevance makes Miller’s plays profoundly relatable, even decades after he wrote them, and his ability to depict human grief and pain that everyone experiences in some form or another also accounts for the plays’ continuing popularity across cultures, languages, and countries around the world.

Like many creative professionals, Miller was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956 and was blacklisted from working in Hollywood. Miller wrote what may be his most famous play, *The Crucible*, in response to HUAC’s investigations. (For more on HUAC, see the essay “*That Terrible Era*”: Arthur Miller and the Red Scare of the 1950’s, in the Study/Patron Guide.) Arthur Miller was married three times (including, most famously, to Hollywood screen star Marilyn Monroe), and he was the father of four children. His daughter Rebecca is married to actor Daniel Day-Lewis, whom she met on the set of the 1996 film adaptation of *The Crucible*. Miller died on Feb. 10, 2005—the 56th anniversary of the Broadway opening of *Death of a Salesman*.



Interesting Fact

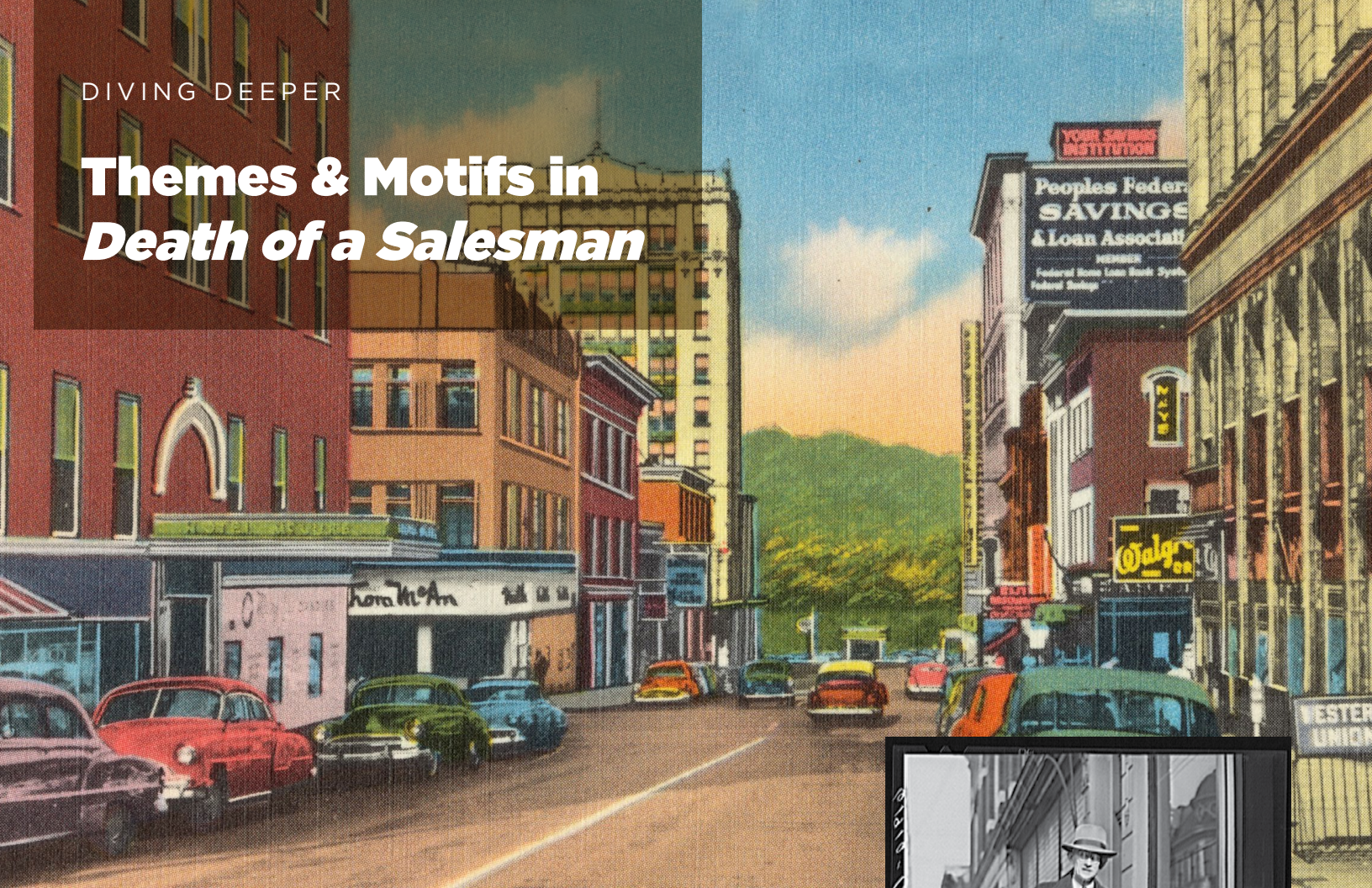
Arthur Miller was married to film star Marilyn Monroe for almost five years. Monroe stood by Miller when he was accused of Communist sympathies during the Red Scare.

Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller. Creative Commons.

Historical Timeline

Life of Arthur Miller	World History
Arthur Miller is born in New York to parents of Polish-Jewish descent.	1915
	1918 World War I ends in Europe.
	1929 The famous Stock Market Crash begins the decade-long Great Depression.
Arthur Miller begins his studies at the University of Michigan.	1934
	1939 Nazi Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II.
	1945 Tennessee Williams' <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> opens on Broadway.
<i>Death of a Salesman</i> opens on Broadway, directed by Elia Kazan. It wins the Pulitzer Prize.	1949
Elia Kazan testifies before the House Un-American Activities Committee and names Miller as a Communist sympathizer.	1950 U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy sparks paranoia about the threat of Communism in the U.S., beginning an era now known as the Red Scare.
Arthur Miller marries Marilyn Monroe.	1952
	1956
	1959 Lorraine Hansberry's <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> opens on Broadway.
Miller supports the first all-Black production of <i>Death of a Salesman</i> at Center Stage in Baltimore.	1972
	1991 The Cold War ends with the collapse of the Soviet Union.
Arthur Miller dies, 56 years after the debut of <i>Death of a Salesman</i> .	2005

Themes & Motifs in *Death of a Salesman*



Traveling Salesmen: In the U.S., the earliest traveling salesmen were peddlers and itinerant sellers who traveled to rural areas selling household goods and necessities. Over time, these peddlers evolved into salesmen who traveled their specific “territory” selling a wide variety of goods, often going door-to-door. By the early 20th century the traveling salesman had become a familiar figure in many communities, and they were a well-established means of commerce and trade (though they were also thought to be—and often were—unscrupulous con artists, as represented by the fictional Harold Hill, the charming but dishonest protagonist in *The Music Man*). By 1949, when *Death of a Salesman* is set, the traveling salesman was becoming obsolete as the number of retail stores grew rapidly in the newly affluent, post-World War II United States.



Traveling salesman. Paris, Kentucky. 1940s. Creative Commons.

The American Dream: In 1949, when Miller’s play is set, the U.S. was entering into a period of economic growth that led to increasing financial prosperity for many Americans, as a result of the booming, post-World War II economy. But not everyone shared in the good fortune of these boom times: Black Americans, most immigrants, and many women were still treated as second-class citizens (and would continue to be mistreated and oppressed until the Civil Rights movements of the 1960’s). Other Americans, including men such as

Themes & Motifs in *Death of a Salesman* continued

Willy Loman, found that their careers had become obsolete, and that they were being replaced by new ways of doing business and new institutions. Although the American Dream persisted, and many people believed in its promise that everyone was equal and could become anything they wanted to be, in reality this optimistic view was far from universally true.

Realism vs. Expressionism – These two theatrical terms describe different methods that playwrights sometimes use to present the narrative, or story, that is the focus of their play. Realism refers to the depiction of everyday characters living ordinary lives. The dialogue, setting, and even the costumes and props reflect solid, everyday reality. The action is usually linear, and there are no supernatural elements. By contrast, the dramatic works of expressionist playwrights have a non-linear structure that may include flashbacks, symbolism, and magical or supernatural elements. Although many expressionist playwrights were deliberately moving away from the earlier realism movement, their plays often employed realistic elements as well (for example, *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams, depicts the lives of ordinary individuals, but it also moves backwards and forwards in time, and it is often referred to as a “memory play”).

Family Relationships: *Death of a Salesman* explores many types of family relationships: the powerful bonds between fathers and sons, between brothers, and between a husband and wife. The play also explores the ways that family members can sometimes idealize each other, often without any evidence and in ways that do not serve them. In this play and in several others, Miller focuses on the darker side of family relationships, and on the tragedy that can result when family members who are in denial about their lives and about each other fail to communicate openly and honestly, resulting in a family system that is profoundly dysfunctional.



Advertisement for 1955 Rambler. Flickr.com.

Themes & Motifs in *Death of a Salesman* *continued*

The Burden of Expectations: This concept, which is central to *Death of a Salesman*, is closely related to the theme of family relationships. Willy Loman's expectations of both his sons, and especially of his older son, Biff, are so completely unrealistic that eventually he drives his sons away from him. Willy's refusal to accept Biff for who he really is creates a burden that eventually becomes unbearable, and the family tension that has been building up for years ultimately explodes in a wrenching night of angry outbursts and recriminations among all four family members.

Loyalty: Many characters in the play are guilty of disloyalty to each other (despite sometimes doing so out of good intentions), and the secrets that various members of the Loman family have been keeping from each other eventually come to light. More broadly, Willy suffers professionally when his own loyalty to the company that has employed him for 35 years no longer matters, and he is demoted and then fired. In the figure of Willy, Arthur Miller portrays what he sees as a much larger societal problem: the lack of loyalty shown by businesses and corporations towards their own employees when those workers are no longer useful or profitable for the business.

Flashbacks: In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller uses the narrative device of flashbacks to tell the story. Willy Loman spends as much time in the past as he does in the present, and through flashbacks, when the action of the play shifts to events that occurred many years before, the audience is able to piece together the narrative arc of the Loman family's history that has brought them to their current unhappy situation. Interestingly, Miller himself noted that "there are no flashbacks, strictly speaking, in 'Death of a Salesman,'" because the action is always taking place in the present, in Willy's mind.

“That Terrible Era”: Arthur Miller, the Cold War, and the Red Scare of the 1950’s



Senator McCarthy with a map of community party organizations, 1954.
Creative Commons.

The second half of the 20th century ushered in a period known as the Cold War. Beginning in the late 1940’s, and following the end of World War II, two global superpowers—the U.S. and the Soviet Union (USSR)—did not engage directly in armed warfare; instead, the countries’ struggles for international dominance manifested in other ways. Along with their global allies—either the Western capitalist countries or the Eastern Communist countries—the U.S. and the USSR competed in areas that ranged from technology and the space race to Olympic sports and, more frighteningly, to the arms race (military weapons and technology, including nuclear weapons). Espionage, propaganda, and fearmongering were common strategies employed by both superpowers.

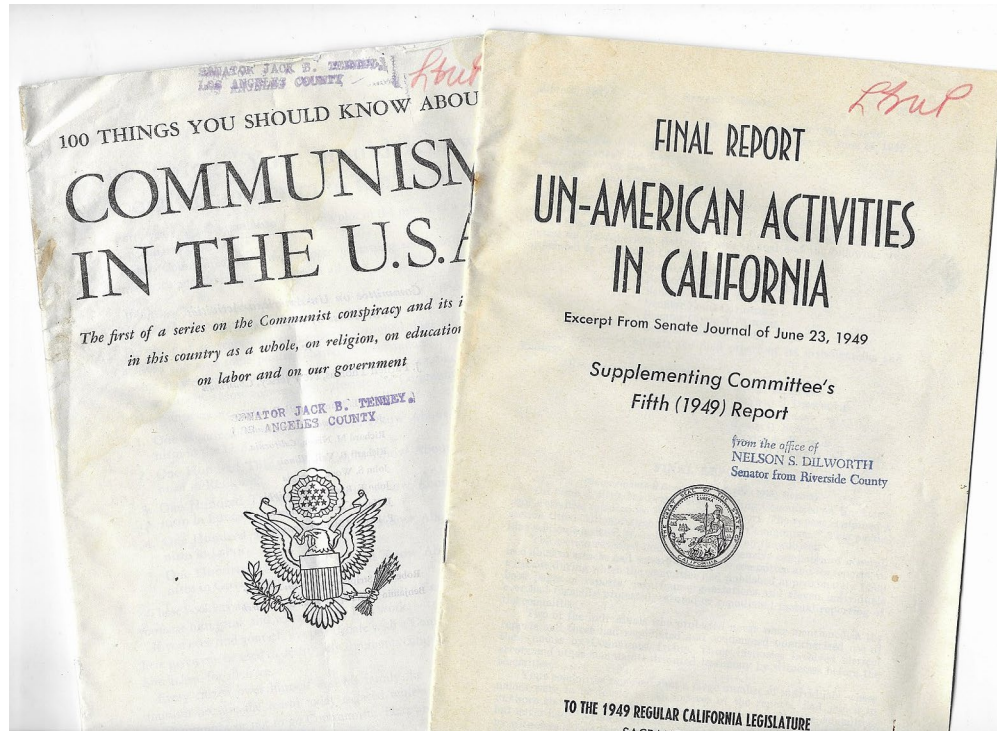
In the U.S., one of the most destructive results of the Cold War was the rise of a virulent strain of anti-Communist sentiment, which became so fierce in the early 1950’s that it led to government-sanctioned activities that were profoundly undemocratic. In Congress, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) launched investigations into numerous individuals, both public and private, who were suspected of having Communist ties, and who were then ordered to testify before the Committee. Similar investigations took place in the Senate and were presided over by Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose tactics were quickly dubbed by McCarthy’s opponents as “McCarthyism,” a pejorative term used to describe behavior that was paranoid, demagogic, or bullying.

“That Terrible Era”: Arthur Miller, the Cold War, and the Red Scare of the 1950’s *continued*

During the years of the so-called “Red Scare,” the HUAC investigations were particularly detrimental to creative artists, many of whom were ultimately “blacklisted” from working in Hollywood. Tragically, many friendships were destroyed as a result of the HUAC investigations. A famous director of films and stage productions named Elia Kazan had been close friends with Arthur Miller since the two first met in the 1940’s; Kazan directed the Broadway debuts of Miller’s *All My Sons* (which Miller dedicated to Kazan) and *Death of a Salesman*. The friendship ended abruptly,

however, when Kazan was ordered to testify before HUAC in 1952, and he named several theater artists, including Miller, as Communist sympathizers. Miller wrote what may be his most famous play, *The Crucible* (1953), as a response to HUAC’s activities, which Miller likened to the Salem witch trials. Miller himself was called before HUAC in 1956, and although he testified that he no longer supported Communism, he also refused to provide the names of others who had been or still were Communist sympathizers. As a result of his refusal, Miller was convicted of contempt of Congress and blacklisted himself, but his conviction was soon overturned, and the era of blacklisting ended not long afterwards as more Americans began denouncing McCarthyism.

Despite his rupture with Kazan, Miller came to his defense many years later when, in 1999, Kazan received an Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement. The Academy’s decision to honor Kazan was controversial because of Kazan’s testimony before HUAC all those years before, and hundreds of protesters demonstrated outside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, where the awards ceremony was being held. Miller, however, wrote in *The*



The covers of the report “Communism in the U.S.A.” by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Supplement to the 5th Report by the California UnAmerican Activities Committee. 23 June 1949. Creative Commons.

“That Terrible Era”: Arthur Miller, the Cold War, and the Red Scare of the 1950’s *continued*

Guardian that “My feelings toward that terrible era are unchanged, but at the same time history ought not to be rewritten. Elia Kazan did sufficient extraordinary work in theater and film to merit acknowledgement.”

The Cold War ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved. Recently, however, the 21st century has seen a rise in global hostilities among nations, and in the nationalist language and the authoritarian suppression that characterize such times of international conflict. Perhaps one reason why Miller’s *The Crucible* continues to be performed so frequently is because, as Arthur Miller knew, that terrible era – whether of the Salem witch trials or of the Red Scare—is never really over; it simply presents in different ways.



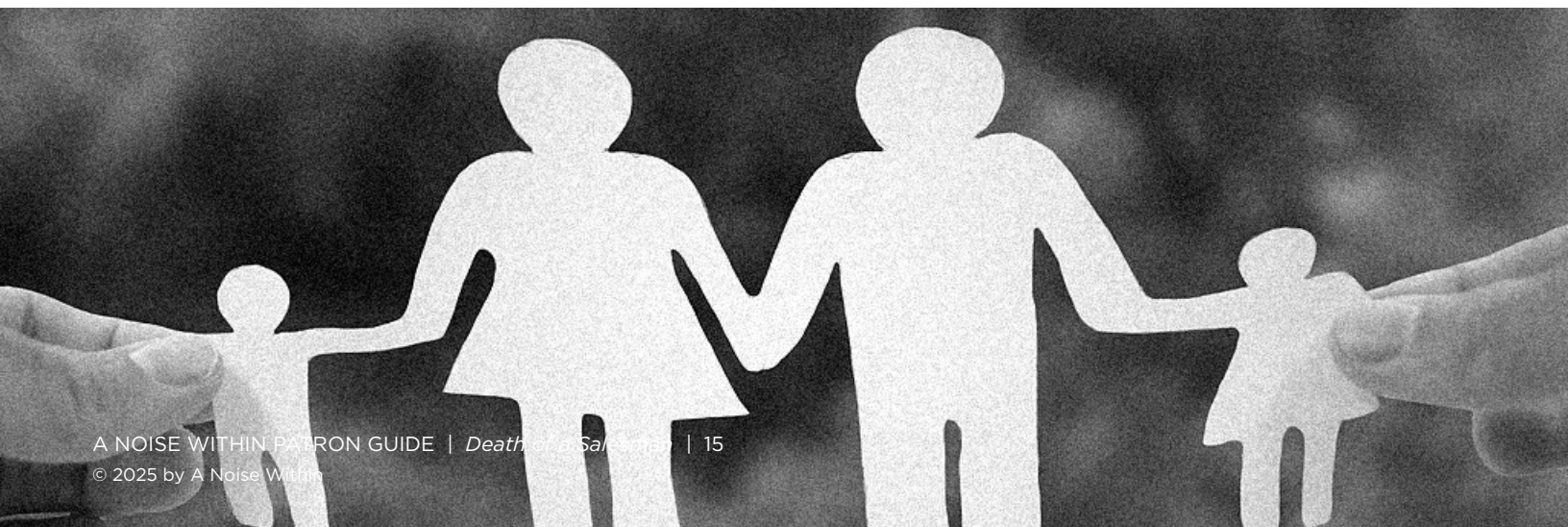
Do you think something like the Red Scare of the 1950’s could happen again in the U.S.? Do you think it would center around concerns about Communism, or something else?

The Violent Love of an American Family

The contemporary playwright Paula Vogel once wrote of American author Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) that “Remarkably, he suggests that violence begins at home, not abroad in the breasts of our enemies, nor outside the family circle.” If Wilder’s plays and novels simply “suggest” that the family unit is the original source of all violence, playwright Arthur Miller made that idea the very foundation of some of his most powerful plays, including *Death of a Salesman*.

Actress Elizabeth Franz, who played Willy Loman’s wife, Linda, in the 1999 Broadway revival of *Death of a Salesman*, said in an interview that the play is about a “family battle.” Others, however, have called Miller’s drama a “love story” that plays out among the various characters: a love story about Willy and Linda; Willy and Biff; and Biff and Happy. But these two interpretations aren’t mutually exclusive; indeed, many families turn themselves into warring factions whose conflicts threaten to destroy the family itself because family members do, in fact, love each other so much. As Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, famously said, “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.” If the four members of the Loman family didn’t care about each other so deeply, if they were truly indifferent to each other’s pain and disappointment, they would not have stayed locked together in perpetual conflict the way they have apparently done for many, many years.

Some of the oldest surviving works of dramatic literature share this focus on the family as the primary source of wider social violence and even war. Works by Classical Greek and Roman authors, including Sophocles, Euripides, and Homer, express this view in their plays about Oedipus, Agamemnon, and other mythical figures. Even the Trojan War as Homer describes it in the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* originates in a family dispute; while Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which describes the fall of Troy and its aftermath, focuses much of its attention on the royal family of Troy and the complex relationships between Troy’s ruler, Priam, and his many heroic, fiercely competitive sons.



The Violent Love of an American Family

continued

Miller was clearly fascinated by the crippling forces of love and grief and competition, and the oppressive burden of expectations, that can play out over and over again in the family unit. Significantly, Miller achieved his first hit with *All My Sons*, which had its Broadway premiere in 1947. This play explores the conflicts caused by family secrets and betrayals, and the destructive violence that results when these secrets inevitably come to light. Moreover, a chance encounter,



Geoff Elliott and Deborah Strang in *All My Sons* at A Noise Within, 2015. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

between Miller and his uncle while Miller was attending a performance of *All My Sons* in Boston led directly to Miller's creation of his next play, *Death of a Salesman*. As Miller told theater critic John Lahr, he ran into his uncle Manny Newman in the theater lobby. Manny was a salesman and the father of two sons, and his first words to Miller—his nephew—in that theater lobby were not “Congratulations!” or “I’m so proud of you!” Instead, Manny told Arthur that Buddy [Manny’s son] is doing very well.” In fact, Buddy wasn’t doing well, and neither was Manny, but Manny could not let go of a family competition that, according to Miller, existed only in Manny’s mind. The encounter stayed with Miller, who filled a notebook with ideas for a play that eventually became *Death of a Salesman*.

Arthur Miller’s family may not have been violent, but there was plenty of chaos and stress and mental illness, including his father’s depression over his financial losses, and the struggles of family members who, in some tragic cases, died by suicide. Miller’s own adult life was tumultuous: he was married three times, including to screen star Marilyn Monroe, whom he married after abandoning his first wife and two children. (He later divorced Monroe, remarried, and fathered two more children.) The characters in *Death of a Salesman* are both familiar and real because Miller has known them all -- and so have we. The pain and guilt and desperate love the characters feel for each other resonate so powerfully because their emotions are believable. Miller’s characters may be living in the America of 75 years ago, but family dynamics have remained relatively unchanged. And even those who have not themselves experienced significant family turmoil can respond with deep compassion to Miller’s characters, who can’t help themselves from destroying the very family that they love so much.

Bonus Material

Want to go deeper into *Death of a Salesman*? ANW's Resident Dramaturg, Miranda Johnson-Haddad, has some suggestions:

Film Adaptations of *Death of a Salesman*

- The 1985 made-for-tv version of the play stars Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff. This adaptation found creative solutions to the challenges of transposing Arthur Miller's stage play to film.
- Arthur Miller disliked the 1951 film adaptation starring Lee J. Cobb and Mildred Dunnock. He particularly disliked the choice to represent Willy as "crazy." Miller believed that the movie's flaws reflected the Cold War concerns that preoccupied the U.S. government at that time about Communism.

Film and Documentary

- For a short documentary about the 1999 Broadway revival for the play's 50th anniversary, see: <https://youtu.be/GY-S1Eu2qUI?si=ryl3qz9cyvvofC3l>
- *Timebends: A Life* (1987) is Arthur Miller's autobiography.
- For the efforts of journalist Edward R. Murrow to stand up to McCarthy and McCarthyism, see the 2005 movie *Good Night and Good Luck*, starring David Strathairn and directed by George Clooney. A 2025 Broadway production starring Clooney is also available for streaming.
- In 2018, HBO released a documentary about Miller that was made by his daughter Rebecca; here's the trailer: <https://youtu.be/7Mx5Wpv4xog?si=ArvwOzfgV71hNJZY>
- For a short 1971 clip of Miller discussing the Red Scare, Communism, and twentieth-century political systems, see: <https://youtu.be/zxjhg4dr7QY?si=8kl8jBsNe8kJ8wfu>

Bonus Material *continued*

Additional Reading on Arthur Miller

- For biographies of Arthur Miller, see: *The Real Arthur Miller: The Playwright Who Cared*, by Andrew Norman (2024); *Arthur Miller*, by Christopher Bigsby (2010); *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work*, by Martin Gottfried (2003); and *Arthur Miller: American Witness (Jewish Lives series)*, by John Lahr (2022).
- Theater critic John Lahr interviewed Arthur Miller about *Death of a Salesman* in 1999, in connection with the play's 50th anniversary: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/01/25/making-willy-loman>
- For more on Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anti-Communist “witch hunts” of the early 1950’s, in particular their effect on Arthur Miller and other artists, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/arthur-miller-mccarthyism/484/>
- For more about Elia Kazan and Arthur Miller, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/elia-kazan-timeline/643/>
 - See also the PBS American Masters episode “None Without Sin” (2003: Season 18, episode 1), which explores the relationship between Kazan and Miller.

ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
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