

*Death of a Salesman*—Essay Topics

1. Willy recalls his sons' teenage years as an idyllic past. What evidence can we find to show that the past is not as idyllic as Willy imagines it to be?
2. What evidence can we find to show that Willy may have chosen a profession that is at odds with his natural inclinations?
3. Aristotle's classical definition of the tragic hero is of a character who falls due to a tragic flaw. Arthur Miller suggested a modern definition of the tragic hero as someone who falls due to the uncontrollable forces that surround him. Critics have argued that Willy Loman has elements of both definitions. Is Willy's downfall a result of his own character flaws and choices, or is his downfall a result of forces beyond his control?
4. How does Willy's interview with Howard reveal that Willy transfers his professional anxieties onto his relationship with his family and conflates the professional and personal realms of his life?
5. What evidence can we find to show that Willy misses the distinction between being loved and being well liked? What are the consequences of Willy's failure to distinguish between the two?
6. How is Willy's retreat into the past a form of escape from his unpleasant present reality? How does it function as a way for Willy to cope with the failure to realize his ambitions?
7. What does the play suggest about Willy's desperate quest for the American Dream?