

Module 7: Balancing the Individual and Society

Topic 5 Content: Themes in *Death of a Salesman*

Introduction

Themes in
Death of a Salesman

Lies and Illusion

Defining Success

A photograph of a room with a wooden chair, a small table with a rotary phone, and a green suitcase on the floor.

Dramas usually rely heavily on the use of dialogue to develop themes. An example of a theme featured in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* includes the break with reality through lies and illusion. Another important theme is the American Dream, or specifically how one defines success in life. Click the tabs above to explore how dialogue is used to develop these themes.

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Lies and Illusion

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From hiding his affair to explaining his poor sales figures, Willy protects himself from disappointment and shame by resorting to lies and excuses. The escape from reality becomes so appealing that Willy increasingly lives in a world of illusion. While outside characters can see through this guise, Willy's family members succumb to believing in Willy's grand illusions. Click the tabs below to view excerpts of dialogue that develop this theme.

Excerpt #1

Excerpt #2

Excerpt #3

Excerpt #4

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Lies and Illusion: Excerpt #1

Themes in
Death of a Salesman

Lies and Illusion **Defining Success**

HAPPY: His name is Biff. You might've heard of him. Great football player.
GIRL: Really? What team?
HAPPY: Are you familiar with football?
GIRL: No. I'm afraid I'm not.
HAPPY: Biff is a quarterback with the New York Giants.
GIRL: Well, that's nice, isn't it? [She drinks]
HAPPY: Good health.
GIRL: I'm happy to meet you.
HAPPY: That's my name. Hap. It's really Harold, but at West Point they called me Happy.

Happy embraces his father's habit of lying and exaggerating. In this excerpt, Happy flirts with a girl and in trying to impress her, lies that Biff plays professional football and that he attends West Point. Although Happy finds no problem with lying in this scene, he has already revealed to Biff that his behavior brings him regret and dissatisfaction. As the person who most embraces Willy's habit of lying, Happy is also the son who will follow in Willy's footsteps.

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Lies and Illusion: Excerpt #2

Themes in
Death of a Salesman

Lies and Illusion

Defining Success

WILLY: In 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions.
HOWARD: Now Willy, you never averaged—
WILLY: I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928!

As Willy negotiates with his boss, Howard, he exaggerates his sales commissions. Unwilling to accept Willy's illusion of business success, Howard attempts to correct Willy's statement, but Willy interrupts and refuses to face reality.

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Lies and Illusion: Excerpt #3

Themes in
Death of a Salesman

Lies and Illusion

Defining Success

WILLY: Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me.

In this rare occasion, Willy acknowledges the truth, albeit right after another one of his illusions. Willy claims to his wife, Linda, that people in Hartford really like him. He then goes on to admit that people do not actually like him that much.

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Lies and Illusion: Excerpt #4

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BIFF: He walked away. I saw him for one minute. I got so mad I could've torn the walls down! How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman here? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and—I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk.

When Biff meets with a former employer and fails to get a business loan, he realizes that he—along with the rest of his family—had been buying into his father's illusions. Biff knows that he was only a shipping clerk, but after his family exaggerates his importance to the employer, he allows himself to believe that he had held the higher position of salesman. Biff is the only family member who resists the lies and self-deception.

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One of the most prominent themes of *Death of a Salesman* is the American Dream, or the hope for individual success and happiness in life. However, the characters define success and happiness differently. For Willy, success means acquiring wealth and happiness, and the means to achieve that are primarily popularity and reputation. Click the tabs below to view excerpts of dialogue that develop this theme.

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Defining Success: Excerpt #1

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BIFF: I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and the time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and I thought, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be . . . when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am.

After Biff steals a fountain pen from his former employer, he realizes that he has been following the wrong dream his whole life. Just as his father passively encouraged him to steal as a youngster, Willy also pressured Biff to be a wealthy businessman. As he describes the incident to Willy, Biff finally comes to realize that his dreams for a happy life do not match the expectations of his father.

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Defining Success: Excerpt #2

Themes in
Death of a Salesman

Lies and Illusion

Defining Success

HAPPY: I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, plenty of women, and still, goddamnit, I'm lonely.

Although Happy agrees with his father's concept of the American Dream, he struggles with inner conflict once he finds that Willy's idea of success is unfulfilling. Happy has acquired impressive material possessions (an apartment and car) and he is well-liked by others (he has plenty of girlfriends), yet the loneliness he experiences leads him to acknowledge that success has not brought him happiness.

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WILLY: Without a penny to his name, three great Universities are begging for him, and from there the sky's the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben, it's who you know and the smile on your face. It's contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore hotel, and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!

In this conversation between Willy and his brother, Ben, Willy demonstrates how important popularity and reputation are to him. According to Willy, anyone can become successful and wealthy "on the basis of being liked."

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Defining Success: Excerpt #4

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Defining Success

WILLY: I've always tried to think otherwise, I guess. I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing—

CHARLEY: Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked.

As Willy chats with his neighbor, Charley, he reiterates his belief in the importance of being well-liked by others in order to be successful and "impressive." Here, Charley interrupts to challenge Willy's insistence that popularity is key to success. He mentions a famous and wealthy businessman named J. P. Morgan as an example of someone who was successful but maybe not so popular.

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