

Death of a Salesman
Motifs

Playwrights utilize the repetition of specific phrases and statements as a means of revealing characters' attitudes, thereby making the reader or listener aware of the characters' view of life. These are called motifs, which are recurring ideas or thoughts in a literary work which unify and assist in developing insights not only into the characters' dominant traits but also into the meaning the playwright wants to incorporate in his work. Arthur Miller uses motifs in his modern tragedy, *Death of a Salesman*.

As you read the play, look for the repeated statements that reveal the characters' views and attitudes. The following questions will help to make you aware of Miller's use of motifs.

"Well liked"

1. Why does Willy Loman constantly refer to being well liked?
2. How does this statement reflect Willy's view of being successful?
3. How does this idea haunt Willy and cause his tragic yet ironic end?
4. Does Willy's belief of the importance of being well liked ever trap him, that is, prevent him from doing what he would really like to do?
5. Do Biff and Hap adopt this idea of being well liked? How does this affect them?

"Stealing"

1. How does Willy feel about stealing? Is it ever justified in his way of thinking?
2. Does Willy believe certain people are allowed to steal? Who are these people? What character traits must they possess that allows them to "steal," at least according to Willy's beliefs?
3. Do Hap and Biff adopt this attitude? Does it ever come back to haunt them?

"Vital to New England"

1. Is Willy "vital to New England"?
2. How does his belief in his belief "vital to New England" influence his way of thinking?
3. What do we learn about Willy from Miller's representation of his sales trips to New England?
4. Why does Willy have an "affair" with Miss Frances? Does she really mean anything to him?

"Debt"

1. How is Willy always trapped in his financial situation? Cite specifics.
2. What financial headaches does Willy constantly fear?
3. How does he react to them?
4. What comment does Miller make concerning American society through Willy's financial plight?

"Boxed in"

1. In Miller's description of the setting of the play, what physical surroundings make Willy feel boxed in?
2. How do these outside forces smother Willy?
3. Does he always feel trapped?

"Woods are burning"

1. How is the motif of being "boxed in" related to Willy's statement that the "woods are burning"?
2. What is Willy's only way out of his situation?

"Isn't that remarkable"

1. What state of mind is Willy in when he repeats the expression "isn't that remarkable"?
2. Is there any consistency to the context in which this statement is made?

"Can't get near him"

1. What is the significance of this statement?
2. Who makes this statement? What does it reveal about the relationship of the characters involved?
3. Why does Hap keep repeating the statement "I'm losing weight"? How does Willy react to it?