Death of a Salesman Questions for Oral Quiz

(From “A Teacher’s Guide to the Penguin edition of *Death of a Salesman”*)

**ACT ONE**

1. Why is Willy home? Why is Linda alarmed that he’s home?

2. Why is Willy annoyed at Biff? How does he describe Biff? What does this tell us about Willy?

3. How has Willy’s neighborhood changed? Why does it matter to the story that his surroundings are no longer the way they used to be?

4. How does Linda treat Willy? How do the boys feel about him? Is Biff trying to spite Willy? Why does Biff come home in the spring?

5. Why won’t Happy go out West with Biff, and why won’t Biff stay?

6. How does Willy act toward the boys when they were young? How do they act toward him? How does

Willy feel about Charley and Bernard?

7. What does Willy’s reaction to Biff ’s theft of the football tell us about Willy? He says the boys look like

Adonises. What other clues show that Willy believes in appearances?

8. Willy praises and then curses the Chevrolet; he tells Linda that he’s very well liked, and then says that people don’t seem to take to him. What do these inconsistencies or contradictions tell us about Willy’s character? Explain. List some other contradictions of Willy in the play and explain.

9. “Five hundred gross in Providence” becomes “roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip.” How does Linda take Willy’s stories? What does this reveal about her? Why does Willy make a fuss about Linda’s mending stockings? How is this important to the play?

10. Why does Charley visit Willy? How does he feel about Willy? How and why do they insult each other?

11. Who is Ben? Why does Ben appear? What does Willy think about the future and about the past? What does Ben teach Biff? Why does Willy feel “kind of temporary” about himself and want Ben to stay?

12. What does Linda think is the trouble with Willy’s life? Why is she angry at her sons? Why does she put the rubber hose back after she had taken it? What does this tell about her?

13. Why is Willy interested when Biff mentions Bill Oliver? Why do they argue? How does Happy try to capture attention?

14. Happy says, "I don't know what to do about him [Willy], it's getting embarrassing." To what is he referring, and what does the fact that Happy thinks this way tell you about his character?

15. Charley says, "To hell with it. When a deposit bottle is broken, you don't get your nickel back." What does he mean?

16. Why does Charley tell Willy "the jails are full of fearless characters"?

17. Why didn’t Willy go with Ben years ago when Ben offered him a job?

18. Charley and Willy are playing cards. Why does Charley leave?

19. What did Willy's father do for a living? How is that different from what Willy does?

20. What advice does Willy give Biff on the evening before he goes to see Bill Oliver? How does Willy contradict himself again?

**ACT TWO**

1. Why is Willy’s mood upbeat at the start of Act Two? What does he expect to happen?

2. Why does Willy tell Howard about Dave Singleman? Describe the dramatic effect when Howard listens to the voices of his family while Willy tries to talk business. Why does Howard tell Willy to drop off his samples and forbid him to go to Boston? Why is this such a blow to Willy?

3. What is Willy’s philosophy? How does Biff as a football hero embody his father’s dreams? Why does Charley say Willy hasn’t grown up?

4. What is Willy’s impression of Bernard when he sees him in his father’s office? Why does Willy exaggerate Biff ’s importance? Why does Bernard ask what happened after the game at Ebbet’s Field?

5. Why won’t Willy work for Charley? Why is Willy able to ask Charley for money? How is Charley’s view of what a salesman needs different from Willy’s view?

6. In the restaurant, how does Happy reflect Willy’s values? Why does Arthur Miller have the girls come in?

7. How does Biff’s realization that his life is a lie underline the theme of the play? Why does Biff take Bill Oliver’s fountain pen? Why can’t he tell his father what happened with Bill Oliver? Why do Biff and Happy leave Willy at the restaurant?

8. Why did Biff go to Boston? What does he discover when he sees the Woman? Why is it that Biff never went to summer school? Why can’t he believe in his father?

9. Why does Linda tell the boys, “Get out of here, both of you, and don’t come back!”?

10. Why does Willy keep planting seeds where they’ve never grown before? Why does Willy think Biff will be impressed with his funeral? Why does Ben say that Biff will call Willy a fool?

11. Why doesn’t Willy want to see Linda? Why does he think Biff is spiting him? Why does Biff show him the rubber hose? Why does Biff confront Willy and Happy?

12. What does Biff do that elates Willy? How does Happy try to attract Willy’s attention? How does Ben influence Willy at this point?

13. "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away -- a man isn't a piece of fruit!" At point does Willy say this and explain why he said that.

14. "This is no time for false pride, Willy. . . . You've got two great boys, haven't you?" Who said this and why? What is sadly ironic about this statement?

15. Ben says. "What are you building? Lay your hands on it. Where is it?" When does he say this and what is the point of this line?

16. ". . . I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been." Who said this, why, and what does the character mean by it?

17. Willy says, ". . . the woods are burning, boys. Can't you understand? There's a big blaze going on all around." What does that mean by this?

18. What is Biff's opinion of his father now, when he tells it to Miss Forsythe?

19. Willy says, "A man can't go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something." What does he mean?

20. Biff says, "Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?" What is the significance of this line? Why is it a foreshadowing?

21. Ben says, "The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy." Explain.

22. Biff says, "He had all the wrong dreams. All, all wrong." Explain.

23. Based on the events of the play and our knowledge of the characters, what will probably become of Biff and Happy?

24. Linda says, "We're free and clear." What is the double meaning here?

**REQUIEM**

1. What is a requiem? What is the purpose of this final act? To what extent is it successful?

2. Charley says: “No man only needs a little salary.” To what is he referring? What else does a man need?

3. Explain the irony of Linda’s last speech.

**DELVING DEEPER**

1. Who is to blame for Willy’s destruction/death?

2. What is the turning point in Willy’s life? Is Willy the main character in this play or is it Biff? Why? What does Biff discover about himself? How does this discovery affect his relationship with Willy? How is Biff’s self-realization dramatic? What is the climax of the play?

3. Does Linda help or hinder Willy in overlooking his small sales and his dishonest attempts to make them seem bigger? How else does she influence Willy? Discuss Linda’s remark, “Attention—attention must finally be paid to such a man!” What is the effect of the switch in Linda’s speech to this very formal statement?

5. What is Willy’s dream? What is he searching for throughout the play? Why doesn’t he find it? Did he have a chance of fulfilling it? Did he have the wrong dream; inappropriate attitudes? Is he a born loser, or does he stand in his own way to success? Explain.

6. Why is Biff so angry about the incident in Boston? Why does Biff steal? Does Biff use Willy’s behavior as an excuse for his own waywardness?

7. What do we know about Linda? Use three adjectives to describe her, and support them with examples from the play. Does she know about the Woman in Boston? What makes you think she does or doesn’t? Describe her relationship with Willy and with her sons. Is her character the same in reality and in Willy’s memories of her?

8. How does Ben affect Willy? How does he influence the events in the play? What do you think of the way he has achieved his wealth?

9. Willy is proud of putting up the living-room ceiling and making a cement porch. How is the image of working with his hands carried through the play? Why, then, doesn’t Willy think highly of being a carpenter?

10. Is Willy’s death in a car more or less appropriate than a suicide using the rubber hose on the water heater would be? Why? What harm does Willy’s death do? What good?

11. Trace one of the symbols (stockings, diamonds, etc.) throughout the play and explain why and how Miller has used it. What other symbols does Miller use and to what purpose?

12. How does the structure of the play mirror Willy’s blurring of illusion and reality?

13. How is Willy’s killing himself for the insurance money symptomatic of the way he has lived? What legacy does Willy leave his family?