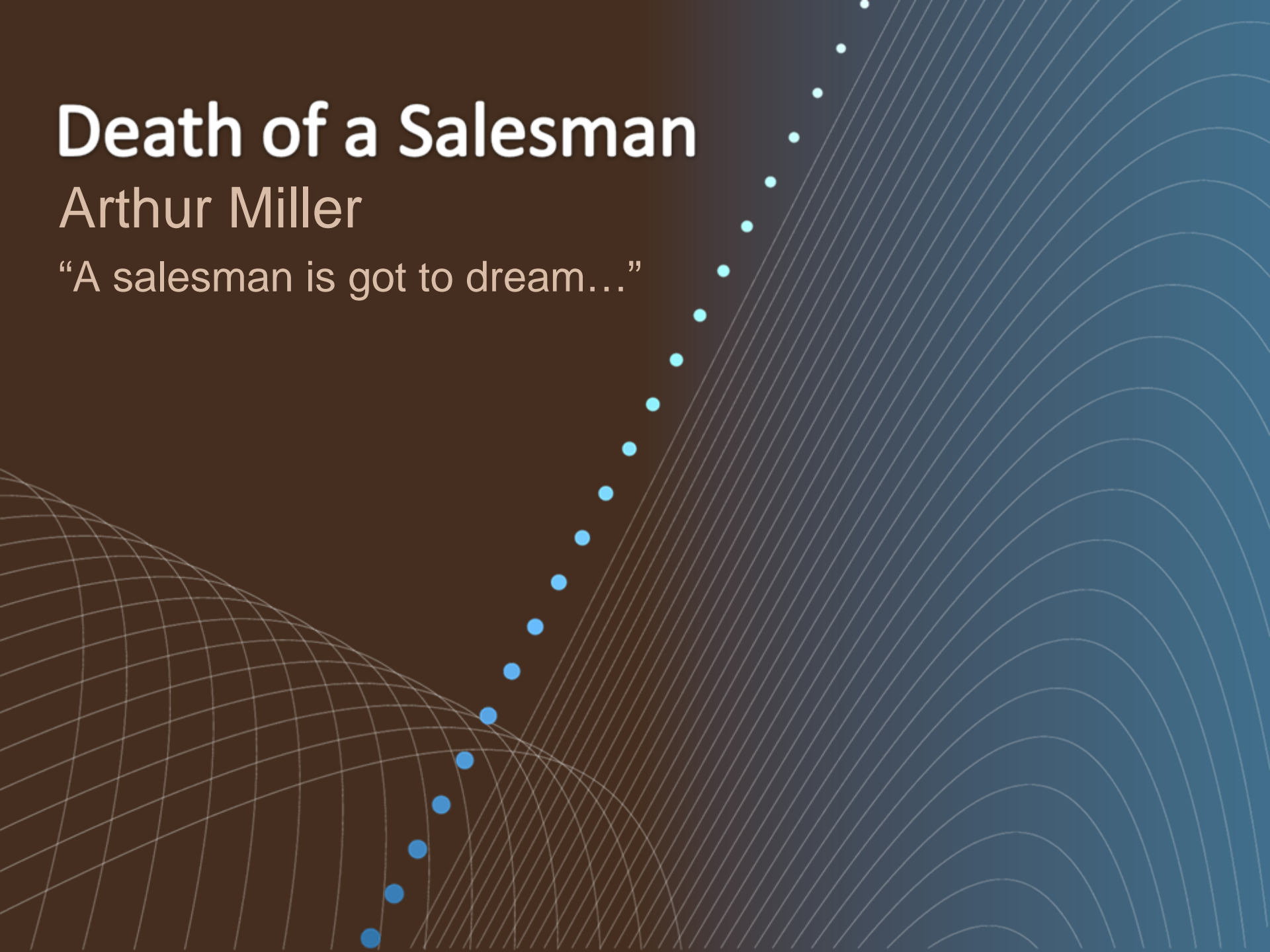


Death of a Salesman

Arthur Miller

“A salesman is got to dream...”



Background

- Has its origins in a short story Miller wrote at the age of 17 (the same age as Biff Loman)
- Written in 1949 as an attack on the materialistic aspect of the American Dream – the achievement of wealth and success without integrity
- Won Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award, & New York Drama Critic's Circle Award for Best play all in one year, the first to win all three major awards
- Upon first opening, it ran for 742 consecutive performances

Background

- Miller bases Willy Loman on his uncle Manny Newman, a salesman, who was “a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment.”
- Miller’s cousin Buddy Newman was very much like Biff & Happy Loman...athletic, successful with girls, but a failure at academics

The American Dream

- Vision of America as “new Eden”
 - Beautiful, bountiful, rewarding land
- Importance of the individual
 - Independent, self-reliant person—Emerson given most credit for defining the American Dream
- Future held boundless opportunity
 - Optimism in the future = we see abundant opportunity as our *birthright*
 - generally believe in positive progress of our lives; view our lives as moving toward perfection; joy seems “just around the corner”

Structure

- Play is divided into three main parts; each section takes place on a different day in the “present-day” (spring 1949)
 - Act I: nighttime
 - Act II: various times the next day
 - Requiem: several days later
- The two *incidents* that begin the play actually occur before the play: Biff’s return home & the arrival of the news of Ben’s death
- Use of flashbacks

Expressionism

- In both the dramatic and visual art, expressionism distorts reality to create an emotional effect, especially emotional angst, which stands in contrast to the conventional goal of the playwright to create a sense of verisimilitude
- Expressionist plays dramatize the protagonist's suffering and spiritual awakening
- They also dramatize the struggle against bourgeois values and society's established authority

Topics & Themes

- The corruption of the American Dream & misplaced values
- The role of self-awareness in attaining the American Dream
- *Death of a Salesman* as a modern tragedy
- “Conquering the wilderness”
- Privations of the past & their effect on future generations

Essential Questions:

- How does Willy Loman function as a tragic character? Is his death heroic? Can we even consider him a tragic hero?
- Why does he long for success?
- How do flashbacks affect the narrative?
- How are characters' names significant (Happy, Biff, Loman and Singleman)?
- Why does Miller choose a salesman as his central character?
- What did Miller mean when he said that the play takes place in both “social time” and “psychic time”?

On the Web:

- No online text...sorry ☹️
- Miller's essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (online text and PDF available)