Death of A Salesman

The Artist's Vision of the American Dream

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Grades 8-12

Introduction:
After seeing and/or reading *Death of A Salesman**, students will compare it to another art form in which the American Dream is portrayed. Students will identify and analyze how Mid-Century visual artists and writers portray, critique, and define the American Dream. Using these strategies, students will examine their own American Dream, synthesizing their position into an original poem.

*This lesson plan can be done without having seen or read the play, as well.

Learning Objectives:
Understand the pervasiveness of the American Dream as a theme for 20th and 21st century artists and how this theme has shaped our perception and interpretation of the past, how it defines the present, and how it informs our future.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the American Dream?
- Is the American Dream achievable? For all?
- How do artists communicate their feelings on a universal theme?

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.7
Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.

CSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7
Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus).

Materials:

- *Death of A Salesman* pre-selected scenes (within this lesson plan)
- Selected artworks from the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (links provided within)

Classroom Activities:

- **Lesson Activity One: Scene work & Illustrations**
  - Students read aloud the scenes from the play to distill themes and emotions.
  - Students illustrate the identified themes in original drawings.

- **Lesson Activity Two: Presenting theme in Art**
    - Students assess a Mid-Century American artwork comparing its themes and emotions to the scene they read previously
- **Lesson Activity Three: Reflection & Discussion**
    - Students share the larger class their observations and discuss how the scenes and images do or do not reflect their own views on the American Dream.

- **Lesson Activity Four: Creating a New American Dream (Optional)**
    - Students demonstrate understanding of how artists and authors portray theme by writing a poem or drawing their own feelings on what being "American" means.

Lesson Activity One: Scene work

Put your students into 5 small groups. Distribute enough copies of the scenes and questions attached so that each person has a copy.

1. Students will assign parts and read the scene aloud twice.
2. In those small groups, students should then be instructed to follow the prompts to analyze the scene.
3. Students will draw the emotions or themes they have identified.
   **Please remind students they will <u>not</u> be assessed on the quality of the drawings, but rather they are meant to access expression from them—to get at their perspective on the topic in a different way.*

Lesson Activity Two: Visualizing a Theme

Ask students to look at the link to their assigned Mid 20th Century artwork (via computer, i-pad, phone, etc.) Have students read the prompts aloud, taking turns as leaders of the conversation.

Lesson Activity Three: Reflection & Discussion

As one large class, have the small groups report on what they discovered about theme crossing over between literature and artwork. Ask them:

1. How did the author/artist communicate a theme on the American Dream in this work?
2. What was similar in the conveyance? What was different?
3. What emotions are generated from art and literature that cannot be from nonfiction or journalistic writing?
    a. Ask students to talk about and share the journalistic headlines they wrote for their scenes and their original drawings.
        i. How do messages in art differ from those in journalism?
        ii. How can emotions be conveyed in both journalism and art?

And most importantly, ask students:

4. What is *your* view of the American Dream?
    a. How does what you read (the scenes) and saw (the artworks) fit with your own view of the American Dream?
    b. Who does the American Dream apply to?
    c. What does it mean to you?
    d. How would you convey your vision of the American Dream in art or literature?

Lesson Activity 4: Creating a New American Dream
In class, have students do a 5 minute free write on what the American Dream means to them. They are to write constantly, with their pen not moving from the paper (or typing without stopping). The goal is a stream-of-consciousness writing that gets to deeper feelings and perspective. It's often helpful to play instrumental music during this time.

1. After the free write, have students underline two key phrases or words that excites them or that they feel represents them.

2. The first word or phrase is now the first line of a poem. Students should continue on with the poem.

3. The second word or phrase is the last line in the poem.

4. This can be assigned as homework.

5. The poems can be shared in class or published in an online anthology (on sites like https://www.slideshare.net, google docs, http://www.bookemon.com/, https://www.apple.com/ibooks-author, etc.)

6. Share what you created with Ford's Theatre (@FordsEdu) and Smithsonian American Art Museum (**@americanart**)!

Group 1

Scene Study: In your group, assign the parts below to be read aloud. Read it aloud **twice**.

Linda: When you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and—he's just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it's just that maybe he can't bring himself to—to open up to you. Why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that?

Biff [evasively]: I'm not hateful, Mom.

Linda: But you no sooner come in the door than you're fighting!

Biff: I don't know why. I mean to change. I'm tryin', Mom, you understand?

Linda: Are you home to stay now?

Biff: I don't know. I want to look around, see what's doin'.

Linda: Biff, you can't look around all your life, can you?

Biff: I just can't take hold, Mom. I can't take hold of some kind of a life.

Linda: Biff, a man is not a bird, to come and go with the springtime.

Biff: Your hair . . . [He touches her hair.] Your hair got so gray.

Linda: Oh, it's been gray since you were in high school. I just stopped dyeing it, that's all.

Biff: Dye it again, will ya? I don't want my pal looking old. [He smiles.]

Linda: You're such a boy! You think you can go away for a year and...You've got to get it into your head now that one day you'll knock on this door and there'll be strange people here—

Now…

1) Using descriptive words, work individually to title this scene as a journalist would for an article (For example, "Man's Hostile Confrontation With Neighbor Suggests Deeper Problems Within").
2) In the scene, <u>underline</u> words that evoke imagery.
3) <u>Circle</u> words that are active verbs.
4) As a group <u>discuss</u> and <u>jot down some notes</u>:
    a. What is the **conflict** in this scene? (Who is disagreeing and what are they disagreeing *about*?)
    b. What is the **plot** of this scene? (If you had to tell someone on the phone what happened in this scene what would you say?)
    c. While you were reading this scene, how did it make you feel? Could you **relate** to anything in it?
    d. What is this scene about as it pertains to the whole world and humanity in general? What is the author trying to say about people?
5) Individually, go a little deeper:
    a. <u>Write down one word</u> that represents the theme and/or emotion of this scene.
        i. (for example, if your scene is about manhood perhaps the word would be strength. And an emotion related to strength (having it or not having it) might be powerful/weak.
    b. On a separate piece of paper, draw that emotion or that theme.

c. Lastly, write a headline for this drawing that captures the most important aspect that should be remembered. (For example, “Illustration of Man Running Portrays Solitary Search for Truth”.)

Next…
Continue exploring the play’s themes from a different angle, comparing how artists and writers convey mood and tone to address universal themes.

Group 1 (Cont'd)

1) Without looking at the title, look carefully at reproductions of THIS ARTWORK for at least 30 seconds. (*Click on the link to view enlarged image)*

2) Imagine that your eyes are a paintbrush or scanner. Reach out and touch every part of the artwork with your eyes. Look again for some small detail you missed before.

3) How would you divide this artwork, if you could? Would you cut it in half vertically? In quadrants? How do the sections differ in color? …in light? …in mood?

4) What can you tell about the subject's life, based on what you can see?

Edward Hopper, trained in New York and Paris, had won acclaim as a painter by the time he created this artwork in 1950. Throughout his career he painted characteristic American subjects, from movie theaters and restaurants to New England lighthouses. His images capture dramatic areas of light and shadow and often evoke a strong sense of isolation and loneliness, even when there is more than one figure portrayed.

In your group, ask each other these questions and jot down some notes.

- What is happening in this picture? What do you see that makes you think that?
- How might the whole artwork symbolize the difference between inner and outer lives?
- Imagine that Linda could see this artwork. What elements of this painting might be meaningful to her, if any? Why?
- Compare your thinking about this artwork to your thinking about the excerpt from *Death of a Salesman*.
- Imagine that you could substitute Biff, Happy, Willy, or Linda for the woman in this painting. What would they be doing in the picture as they stand at the window? Why are they standing there?
- How does the artwork connect with the conflict in this scene from *Death of a Salesm*an? With the play's central theme of the American Dream?

Group 2

Scene Study: In your group, assign the parts below to be read aloud. Read it aloud **twice**.

Linda: And, Willy, don't forget to ask him for a little advance, because we've got the insurance premium; it's the grace period now.

Willy: That's a hundred…?

Linda: A hundred-and-eight, sixty-eight. Because we're a little short again.

Willy: Why are we short?

Linda: Well, you had the motor job on the car…

Willy: That goddamn Studebaker…

Linda: Well, you got one more payment on the refrigerator.

Willy: But it just broke again…

Linda: Well, it's old, dear…

Willy: I told you we should've bought a well-advertised machine. Charley bought a General Electric and it's twenty years old and it's still good, that son of a bitch!

Linda: But, Willy…

Willy: Whoever heard of a Hastings refrigerator? Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken! I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddamn maniac. They time those things… they time them so when you finally paid for them, they're used up.

Now…

1) Using descriptive words, work individually to title this scene as a journalist would for an article (For example, "Man's Hostile Confrontation With Neighbor Suggests Deeper Problems Within").
2) In the scene, underline words that evoke imagery.
3) Circle words that are active verbs.
4) As a group discuss and jot down some notes:
    a. What is the **conflict** in this scene? (Who is disagreeing and what are they disagreeing *about*?)
    b. What is the **plot** of this scene? (If you had to tell someone on the phone what happened in this scene what would you say?)
    c. While you were reading this scene, how did it make you feel? Could you **relate** to anything in it?
    d. What is this scene about as it pertains to the whole world and **humanity** in general? What is the author trying to say about people?
5) Individually, go a little deeper:
    a. Write down one word that represents the theme and/or emotion of this scene.
        i. (for example, if your scene is about manhood perhaps the word would be strength. And an emotion related to strength (having it or not having it) might be powerful/weak.
    b. On a separate piece of paper, draw that emotion or that theme.

c. Lastly, write a headline for this drawing that captures the most important aspect that should be remembered. (For example, "Illustration of Man Running Portrays Solitary Search for Truth".)

Continue exploring the play's themes from a different angle, comparing how artists and writers convey mood and tone to address universal themes.

Group 2 (Cont'd)

Next…
Continue exploring the play's themes from a different angle, comparing how artists and writers convey mood and tone to address universal themes.

1) Without looking at the title, look carefully at reproductions of THIS ARTWORK (*Click on the link to view enlarged image)* for at least 30 seconds. Imagine that your eyes are a paintbrush or scanner. Reach out and touch every part of the artwork with your eyes. Look again for some small detail you missed before.

2) Based on what you see, what do you think the sitter's life is like? What do you see that makes you say that?

This artwork is actually a self-portrait. In it, the artist is using the same style on himself that he used on everyone else: making the familiar unfamiliar by highlighting every wrinkle, hair, blemish, and bulge. Some critics went so far as to call him the "painter of horrors." We can assume that he had seen horrors during WWI; he had served as a medical draughtsman at a hospital in France. This print, however, was made in 1948, almost 3 years after the close of WWII.

- What comparison is the artist drawing between people and things in this work?
- What do you see that looks familiar? What looks unfamiliar?
- What is the artwork's message about material possessions?
- Compare your thinking about this artwork to your thinking about the excerpt from *Death of a Salesman.*
- How does the artwork connect with the conflict in this scene from *Death of a Salesman*? With the play's central theme of the American Dream?

Group 3

Scene Study: In your group, assign the parts below to be read aloud. Read it aloud **twice**.

Willy: If I had forty dollars a week…that's all I'd need. Forty dollars, Howard.

Howard: Kid, I can't take blood from a stone, I…

Willy: Howard, the year Al Smith was nominated your father came to me and…

Howard: I've got to see some people, kid…

Willy: I'm talking about your father! There were promised made in this office! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see—now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit! (Pause) Now pay attention. Your father—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: (Bangs his hand on desk.) I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928! And your father came to me… or rather I was in the office here... it was right over this desk… and he put his hand on my shoulder…

Howard: Willy, I gotta see some people. Pull yourself together.

Now…

1) Using descriptive words, work individually to title this scene as a journalist would for an article (For example, "Man's Hostile Confrontation With Neighbor Suggests Deeper Problems Within").
2) In the scene, <u>underline</u> words that evoke imagery.
3) <u>Circle</u> words that are active verbs.
4) As a group <u>discuss</u> and <u>jot down some notes</u>:
    a. What is the **conflict** in this scene? (Who is disagreeing and what are they disagreeing *about*?)
    b. What is the **plot** of this scene? (If you had to tell someone on the phone what happened in this scene what would you say?)
    c. While you were reading this scene, how did it make you feel? Could you **relate** to anything in it?
    d. What is this scene about as it pertains to the whole world and humanity in general? What is the author trying to say about people?
5) Individually, go a little deeper:
    a. <u>Write down one word</u> that represents the theme and/or emotion of this scene.
        i. (for example, if your scene is about manhood perhaps the word would be strength. And an emotion related to strength (having it or not having it) might be powerful/weak.
    b. On a separate piece of paper, draw that emotion or that theme.
    c. Lastly, write a headline for this drawing that captures the most important aspect that should be remembered. (For example, "Illustration of Man Running Portrays Solitary Search for Truth".)

Group 3 (Cont'd)

Next…
Continue exploring the play's themes from a different angle, comparing how artists and writers convey mood and tone to address universal themes.

1) Without looking at the title, look carefully at reproductions of THIS ARTWORK (*Click on the link to view enlarged image)* for at least 30 seconds. Imagine that your eyes are a paintbrush or scanner. Reach out and touch every part of the artwork with your eyes. Look again for some small detail you missed before.

2) What do you ***see*** in this artwork? What do you ***think*** about what you see?

During the artist's childhood, refrigerators did not run on electricity. Rather, they were cooled by huge blocks of ice. The artist-Ralph Fasanella-worked alongside his father on his ice delivery route in New York City, putting in long hard days on tough streets.

- Based on what you see, what was the artist's attitude toward manual labor? What does he want the viewer to know or think about the role of everyday people in a community? What do you see that makes you say that?

- If Willy could see this artwork, which figure would he most identify with? What do you see that makes you say that?

- Which figure do you think Howard would identify with? What do you see that makes you say *that*?

The artist had been educated only through the 8th grade before he began working full-time. Fasanella worked as a garment worker, truck driver, ice delivery man (like his father), union organizer and gas station owner. As an advocate for laborers' rights, he saw that images could be powerful persuasive tools. At age 31 he learned how to paint and draw.

3This painting was made in 1958. Based on what you know, how might people have responded to this artwork?

4) Fasanella's mother warned him about "social amnesia" – forgetting society's past. Why might people want to forget? Why should we try to remember?

5) Compare your thinking about this artwork to your thinking about the excerpt from *Death of a Salesman*.

6) How does the artwork connect with the conflict in this scene from *Death of a Salesman*? With the play's critique of the American Dream?

Group 4

Scene Study: In your group, assign the parts below to be read aloud. Read it aloud **twice**.

Biff: You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was in jail. Stop crying. I'm through with it.

Willy: I suppose that's my fault!

Biff: I stole myself out of every good job since high school!

Willy: And whose fault is that!?

Biff: And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!

Willy: I hear that!

Linda: Don't Biff.

Biff: It's goddam time you heard that! I had to be boss big shot in two weeks, and I'm through with it!

Willy: Then hang yourself; for spite, hang yourself!

Biff: No! Nobody's hanging himself, Willy! I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today…and suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building….I saw…do you hear this!—I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw …the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world; the work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office building making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself; when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I saw I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy!

Now…

1) Using descriptive words, work individually to title this scene as a journalist would for an article (For example, "Man's Hostile Confrontation With Neighbor Suggests Deeper Problems Within").
2) In the scene, <u>underline</u> words that evoke imagery.
3) <u>Circle</u> words that are active verbs.
4) As a group <u>discuss</u> and <u>jot down some notes</u>:
    a. What is the **conflict** in this scene? (Who is disagreeing and what are they disagreeing *about*?)
    b. What is the **plot** of this scene? (If you had to tell someone on the phone what happened in this scene what would you say?)
    c. While you were reading this scene, how did it make you feel? Could you **relate** to anything in it?
    d. What is this scene about as it pertains to the whole world and humanity in general? What is the author trying to say about people?
5) Individually, go a little deeper:
    a. <u>Write down one word</u> that represents the theme and/or emotion of this scene.
        i. (for example, if your scene is about manhood perhaps the word would be strength. And an emotion related to strength (having it or not having it) might be powerful/weak.
    b. On a separate piece of paper, draw that emotion or that theme.

c. Lastly, write a headline for this drawing that captures the most important aspect that should be remembered. (For example, "Illustration of Man Running Portrays Solitary Search for Truth".)

Group 4 (Cont'd)

Next…
Continue exploring the play's themes from a different angle, comparing how artists and writers convey mood and tone to address universal themes.

1) Without looking at the title, look carefully at reproductions of THIS ARTWORK (*Click on the link to view enlarged image)* for at least 30 seconds. Imagine that your eyes are a paintbrush or scanner. Reach out and touch every part of the artwork with your eyes. Look again for some small detail you missed before.

2) Based on what you see, what was the artist's attitude toward farmers and farming? What does he want the viewer to know or think about farmers? What do you see that makes you say that?

3) What can you see in this artwork? What can you not see?

4) If Biff could have gone West, which role in this artwork would he have been happy in? What do you see that makes you say that?

Just like Biff, the artist who created this print was born in an East Coast city. After extensive training, he wound up teaching art at a college in Kansas. There he was greatly influenced by a style called Regionalism. Regionalist artists created artworks that, in a time of big technological changes in cities and on farms, celebrated the American heartland and rural life.

5) This print was made in 1943. What was going on during that period in American history? [Jot down a list of 3-4 events.]

6) Based on what you know, what might be missing from this artwork? [Group members should annotate the artwork.]

Compare your thinking about this artwork to your thinking about the excerpt from *Death of a Salesman*.

7) How does the artwork connect with the conflict in this scene from *Death of a Salesman*? With the play's critique of the American Dream?

Lesson Activity Artworks

Group 1:
Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, 1950. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Sara Roby Foundation

Group 2:
Ivan Albright, *Self-Portrait--55 East Division Street*, 1948. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase

Group 3:
Ralph Fasanella, *Iceman Crucified #4*, 1958. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the estate of Ralph Fasanella © 1958, Estate of Ralph Fasanella

Group 4:
John Stockton De Martelly, *While the Sun Shines*, 1943. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Frank McClure