

Historical Context of *Death of a Salesman* Notes

The conditions that we see in *Death of a Salesman* are extremely representative of the post-World War II period:

- **United States experiencing economic prosperity:** After WWII ended in 1945, the United States experienced unprecedented economic prosperity driven by the increase in industrial production markets.
- **Increase in spending and housing construction:** America now had a surplus of goods and services from which to choose and the money to purchase them. Housing construction became a booming industry (as seen in the play through constant references to the apartment buildings being erected around their house).
- **Economic situation unimproved for the poorest of Americans:** High inflation rates kept poorer citizens from saving any money. Government policies were established to favour bigger cooperations, not small-time farmers. The lowest paid workers (migrant farmers and unskilled labourers, like Happy and Biff) continued to struggle in a society that believed in upward social mobility but did not necessarily make it possible.
- **Credit purchases:** Americans felt very secure in their newfound economic prosperity and began to use credit to purchase products and services that they desired, even if they could not necessarily afford them. The prices of these goods and services were driven higher and higher by increased demand, but Americans continued to purchase them, using credit to buy what they could not otherwise afford. Things like automobiles were being purchased on credit cards instead of in cash. The amount of long-term credit, such as mortgages, rose dramatically. Willy Loman, the protagonist in the play, suffers the effects of relying too much on credit.
- **Capitalism vs. Communism:** The United States firmly established itself as a “superpower” among the world’s nations through its intervention in WWII. The American government and people suddenly bore the responsibility of retaining their position in the world and “keeping the world safe for democracy” by protecting it from the influences of another world “superpower”, the communist Soviet Union. Americans felt a deep-seated need to prove that capitalism was better than communism during the period that followed WWII (the Cold War era). To do this, they felt obligated to achieve financial success. Willy’s preoccupation with his financial success and status reflect this Cold War attitude.
- **Growth of corporations and mass communications media/being well liked:** The growth of large corporations and mass communications media such as radio and television made Americans feel more like a large, connected society. This led to a new-found desire to conform to the accepted norms and values of the majority. Instead of being a nation of individualists, the United States became a nation of people who wished desperately for acceptance by their peers. Willy displays his preoccupation with being

“well liked”, which he views as the ultimate measure of success.

- **The American Dream:** A set of ideals that includes freedom, the opportunity for prosperity and success, and the possibility for upward social mobility achieved through hard work and determination.