Death of a Salesman

Essay: Discuss the importance of dreams in the play

Introduction

Here you need to give an overview as to what kind of dreams are important in Death of a Salesman and in what ways they are significant. Which of the following kind of dreams feature in the play?

- Dreams that take place while asleep
- Hopes and ambitions
- Daydreams and fantasies
- National/cultural dreams e.g. the American Dream

Dreams are an integral part of the play: they not only motivate the characters’ actions and go some way to explaining their behaviour in the past and ‘real time’ of the drama but they affect the way the play is structured.

The American Dream

Why is the idea of the American Dream important in the play?

To decide why the American Dream is important in Death of a Salesman we need to think about what it means. Which of the following do you think are important to the American Dream? Can you add to the list?

- Having the best of everything
- Owning your own land
- Being successful and popular
- Having money
- Being in the open air

The American Dream is very much linked to capitalism and a consumer culture. This can lead to a society where a few people manage to be successful but others suffer from increased competition, pressure to succeed and a feeling of disappointment and inadequacy if they are not earning enough money or able to buy the best of everything. Capitalist society can also lead to people being discarded when they are no longer financially useful. These are all important ideas in Death of a Salesman.

Think about the motif of consumer goods such as refrigerators and cars for example. What does the recurrence of consumer goods tell us about the Lomans and what is important to them?

How are individual characters affected by the American Dream?

All of the male characters feel the pressure to succeed although the kind of success they hope to achieve would not necessarily ever make them happy. Willy also feels pressured to own the best of everything. Do any of the characters ever question the validity of the American Dream?

Hopes and Ambitions

What are the hopes and dreams of each member of the Loman family in the past and present? Where have these hopes and ambitions come from? How realistic do you think they are? What effect do hopes and ambitions have on the way the
characters live their lives and the way they treat others? Why do you think hopes and ambitions are so important to some of the characters in the play? Do any of the characters change their hopes and dreams over time? Who does and who doesn’t? Why is this significant? At the end of the play Biff says about Willy ‘He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong.’ What do you think he means by this? How much are characters convinced by their own or others’ dreams and illusions?

**Daydreams, Fantasies and Memories**

As mentioned in the introduction dreams affect the structure of the play as we see Willy’s memories and daydreams acted out before us as if they were flashbacks in a film. What aspects of stagecraft take place to help us recognize we are seeing flashbacks (you will need to look at the stage directions to answer this question)? The effect of seeing the reconstruction of events in the past is that instead of wondering what is going to happen next we are encouraged to wonder what has happened in the past to make the Loman family like they are.

Why does Willy spend so much time thinking about the past? What do Willy’s flashbacks reveal about the characters’ relationships with each other in the past and how does this affect the way we see them in the present? What do Willy’s flashbacks reveal about how Willy has brought up his two sons and how this has affected their future lives?

Remember we never see events in the past as they actually happened but as Willy remembers them. Do you think Willy remembers events accurately? Which events does he distort, exaggerate or completely invent? What does this tell us about Willy’s character?

**Conclusion**

Here, you need to sum up your main arguments. Why are dreams important in the play? What kinds of dreams have you discussed? What do you think Miller is trying to say about the kind of society that encourages people to have hopes and ambitions which are well beyond their reach? What do you think Miller is saying about how the characters in the play have been affected by dreams?