Comparing texts: Death of a Salesman

Synopsis

This play is about the Loman family who live in America in the 1940s. The protagonist, Willy Loman, is a salesman struggling to make enough money to pay the bills who is obsessed with appearing to be successful and ‘well liked’. Willy has a long-suffering wife, Linda, and two sons: Biff and Happy. Although Biff was extremely popular and a talented footballer in his youth, he is still trying to ‘find himself’ at the age of thirty-four while the ironically named Happy is boastful and competitive but equally dissatisfied with his life. The structure of the play is such that we are not so much interested in asking, ‘what is going to happen to this family?’ as ‘what has happened to this family to make them like they are?’ The play is pervaded by different kinds of dreams: the American dream, hopes and ambitions and daydreams and fantasies. These dreams motivate the characters, (temporarily) shield them from the disappointing ‘reality’ of their lives and give them false hopes. Arguably, it is the characters’ dreams which ultimately lead to the play’s tragedy.

Themes

- Dreams: the American dream, hopes and ambitions, daydreams and fantasies
- Parents and children/ fathers and sons
- Popularity and success
- Consumer Society and the dangers of capitalism
- The world of business
- Masculinity
- Illusion
- Responsibility
- Depression
- Memory
- The past
- The family
- The role of women
- Competition
- Technology
- Failure to adapt to modern society
- Disillusionment

Possible Essay Questions

1. Discuss the importance of hopes, ambitions and dreams in Death of a Salesman and The Bell Jar. In your essay you should refer to:
   - Different critical interpretations of the texts
   - The writers’ use of language
   - The writers’ use of narrative technique/ dramatic technique and structure

2. Discuss the presentation of depression/ mental illness/ disillusionment in Death of a Salesman and The Bell Jar. In your essay you should refer to:
   - Different critical interpretations of the texts
   - The writers’ use of language
   - The writers’ use of narrative technique/ dramatic technique and structure

3. Compare and contrast the relationship between fathers and their children in Death of a Salesman and The Wasp Factory. In your essay you should refer to:
   - Different critical interpretations of the texts
   - The writers’ use of language
   - The writers’ use of narrative technique/ dramatic technique and structure