Explore the ways in which social class has been presented dramatically in at least two plays you have studied and consider its significance in each play.

Athol Fugard in his play Sizwe Bansi is Dead and Arthur Miller in his play Death of a Salesman use different methods to present social classes. Miller includes detailed descriptions of props and stage layout along with specific instructions on how the actors are to interact with these. Miller uses this stage craft, along with repeated references to material possessions to present the different social classes in his play. Fugard’s drama is very barren: there are almost no props used and the stage is empty except for the actors and a few simple pieces of furniture (chair and table which alone represent any and every table used in the play). Because of this barrenness, Fugard must reply only on speech to convey social classes in his play. Though both use differing methods to present social classes, both playwrights have social classes, or rather the difference in social classes, as the central adversity that their protagonists face. For Sizwe Bansi the main problem is the difference in social standing of blacks and whites in apartheid South Africa, while for Willy Loman it is his desire to belong to a social class and lifestyle he does not belong to but longs to be in.

The characters in Death of a Salesman constantly refer to brands. Willy often talks about Biff “simonizing” the “Studebaker” or the “Chevy”. There are multiple scenes where Willy and Linda debate over why they choose to buy the “General Electric” refrigerator just because “it had the biggest ads.” Miller is clearly emphasizing the focus on materialism. Ben’s constant use of metaphors concerning “diamonds” also link to this. Diamonds are everlasting, physical, and tangible, and symbolize the current society’s need for physical material wealth. This focus on a materialistic society is truly pronounced in Howard’s scene. Howard enters and exits with his wire recorder. Aside from Ben, he is the only other character in the play completely associated with the prop he brings with him. During the course of his conversation with Willy, not only does he constantly refer to various other material possession (like “coke”, “cameras”, “band saws”, “radios”, etc.) but he constantly ignores Willy in favor of his Wire Recorder: he responds to Willy’s questions by saying, for example: “Listen to this” clearly ignoring whatever Willy had to say. Not only does this show the lack of attention given to Willy, but it also shows how enthralled the current city society is with material wealth. Howard’s scene also highlights the difference in Social class between Willy and many other characters in the play. Howard, like Ben and Charley, are able to feed their materialistic lifestyle because they are relatively well off. Willy on the other hand, is struggling to keep afloat. There are many instances when Willy and Linda are listing their debts and payments, which clearly outweigh the amount of money Willy is brining in. Miller also portrays this disparity in social class with the stage design. He indicates that the Miller’s small house be surrounded by “angular buildings” which not only creates a sense of claustrophobia but perhaps mirrors how everyone else in society figuratively towers over Willy and his family economically.

Social classes in Sizwe Bansi is dead is revealed mostly through speech. While in Death of a Salesman it is through the use of props and stage craft, in Sizwe Bansi is Dead it is mostly through how people are named that the difference in social class is revealed. Throughout his monologue, Styles refers to whites by their last name preceded by their rank or status (sometimes including multiple titles): “Mr. Baas Bradley” where Baas is afrikans for master. This naming convention already hints at the stark contrast in social classes in the play. The whites are actually called “master” by the blacks, in a way bowing to the fact that the blacks themselves are slaves as a result of this naming conventions. Also this reveals the fact that none of the blacks are in positions of authority. All authority figures are white men, highlighting the divide between the two peoples. To make matters worse, the blacks are referred to by the whites as “boy” or “monkey” and definitely never by name. The blacks have their name and thus their individual identities stripped from them. Style’s monologue along with Sizwe and Buntu’s dialogue reveal the oppression the blacks face under the whites. They are forced to work under brutal unsafe conditions, they can be fired simply because a white person “doesn’t like [their] face”, and they are forced to live with complex rules that govern where they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do. The whites are clearly in power in their society and the blacks have absolutely no power whatsoever. Buntu even asks “Do you know any white man…?” suggesting that knowing one will immediately solve all his problems. I think this quote particularly shows how the power in society is divided. Whites can do anything, blacks have to do everything the whites want. Which is similar to Willy’s position wherein the rest of the people in his society are able to be successful and wealthy while he is unable to do so.

In Death of a Salesman, the primary cause of Willy’s problems is his desire to belong in a social class he does not belong in. He wants to belong to this materialistic society. He pretends and puts up a façade with Howard that he listens to the radio, that he plays with band saws to pass the time. Ben, who can be considered to be an extension of Willy’s subconscious, reflects Willy’s desire to leave something physical to signify his successes. But from the people who know Willy, in their speeches in the Requiem, we learn that Willy was happy with “a batch of cement” and he put so much in that “front stoop”. From Biff and Charley’s speeches, we can see that Willy did not belong in a materialistic capitalist society but rather out in the open, building with his hands. It was his desire to go against his nature and try to exit this social class that causes his downfall and inability to succeed. He chooses to go against his nature because of the promise of the American dream which suggests that such a leap from social class is possible. In a way, the social class disparity in Death of a Salesman is much worse than that of apartheid South Africa, at least that in South Africa is honest enough to recognize it’s disparity instead of providing false hope in the form of the American dream. The disparity in social class of blacks and whites is the driving force of the plot of Sizwe Bansi is dead and it is also their desire to break free of their social class that drives the characters in the play.