

# Willie Loman and Oedipus as Tragic Heroes (as defined by Aristotle) Essay Sample

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



"Oedipus the King" and "Death of Salesman" both are tragedies. For a play to be considered as a tragedy it has to meet the principles determined by Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, or those of Arthur Miller who is playwright of twentieth century. According to Aristotle a tragedy is a downfall of a great man because of a flaw in his character or a fatal mistake he has made. However, the play "Death of Salesman" is counterexample of Aristotle's characterization of tragedy. Willie Loman can not be considered as a classic tragic hero. In contrast to Oedipus he is simple ordinary person. His name means that he is "lowman" whose hopes and dreams have been demolished by his faith in false values. Arthur Miller broadens Aristotle's definition of tragedy including the common man to it.

The basic motifs of the play "Oedipus the King" are blindness and vision representing the tragic flaws of the protagonist. Sophocles uses many symbols throughout the play such as: sight, eyes, light and perception in order to emphasize both literal and metaphorical blindness of Oedipus. When he does not want to believe Tiresias, Tiresias answers by saying: "have you eyes" and "do you not see your own damnation?", Tiresias also spoke such words: "those now clear-seeing eyes shall then be darkened". The allusion to sight is polysemantic, this symbol has double meaning. People knew Oedipus as perspicacious and quick comprehensive man. He could find the answer to the riddle of Sphinx but ironically he was not able to perceive the truth about his own personality.

Willie Loman in "Death of Salesman" is also affected by blindness. He is not able to see the reality around him. This tragic lack of sight unites Willie with

Oedipus. Willie lives in his dreams and he is not able to accept the realities of life in a modern society. He isolated himself within the philosophy that person's success is based on his well liked and appearance. Willie said to Biff, " I thank Almighty God that you are both are built like Adonises." (Act I page 33) Then he comments, " Be liked and you will never want." (Act I page 33) This eagerness of Willie to be well liked was so powerful that it blinded him and prevented from realizing that everything that he was aspiring to was false idols imposed by modern society. His stubbornness and reluctance to change were the tragic flaws caused his death.

Both Oedipus and Willie Loman are good but not perfect and the reader can sympathize for them. But their downfall was brought about by their own tragic flaws. Blindness does not always mean loss of sight it is also lack of ability to see. Making mistakes is natural human feature; no one is perfect on this planet. However certain flaws may be fatal for a person. Every action brings its results and a person sooner or later must carry responsibility for his beliefs and if they are false the downfall is inevitable.

Willie Loman wanted to be well liked so strongly that often exaggerated his success and sometimes he even believed that his words were true. Willie was sure that his sons would always be successful because they both had nice appearance and were good sportsmen. But in reality they are unlucky fellows just like Willie. At the end of the play Biff attempts to show Willie that he is just a commoner and he does not want to meet father's expectations, that they are " a dime a dozen." Willie thinks that Biff is saying these words

just to irritate him, he answers Biff, " I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willie Loman and you are Biff Loman!" (act II page 132)

Afterwards Willie took a decision to commit suicide in order to give possibility to Biff to get twenty thousands dollar insurance money for making something of himself. At Willie's funeral Biff states, " He had the wrong dreams" (requiem page 138). But Willie's best friend Charley says, " A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory." (requiem, page 138)

Unfortunately Willie never understood that his expectations and values were false and not worth to die for.

Unlike Willie who had freedom of choice and whose downfall was the result of his own mistakes, flaw of Oedipus was inevitable and uncontrollable. He was bound by fate. He was ignorant about what he did, he did not know what he is and all his attempts to overcome his destiny were failure. He was in despair after finding out that he killed his own father and wed his mother. Oedipus did not want to believe that the prophecies would come true. But that what had to happen it happened. He learnt that he was the one who murdered his father because he was the murderer of Laius who turned out to be his father that attempted to get rid of him. His wife Jocasta committed suicide when she discovered that Oedipus knows the truth. " How could I bear to see when all my sight was horror everywhere?" (ode 4 line 1289). These words were said after Oedipus dug his eyes out in order to punish himself. Afterwards Oedipus rambles through the land accompanied by his daughter Antigone who was his guide.

Obviously both these plays are remarkable patterns of tragedy. Their protagonists live in different époques but question of human flaw is always relevant. A person is free to choose but his freedom is limited by the results of his choice. The difference between Oedipus and Willie Loman is that Willie was able to choose but Oedipus did not have such a freedom, his way was determined by will of gods. Sophocles states that any prophecies of gods of someone's destiny should not be ignored. King Laius and Queen Jocasta attempted to kill their child and stop the prophecy this way but their intentions were failure. Nothing could prevent the prophecy to come true. Had Laius not attempted to get rid of his son Oedipus the events following up after Laius' death and Jocasta's wedding would not have happened. Oedipus also tried to deny power of gods by leaving his foster parents. Had he not taken a decision to leave Corinth he would not kill Laius who turned out to be his father. Oedipus was an outcast from the very beginning of his life because of the prophecy of Delphi's Oracle.

Oedipus did not want to listen to the gods. He was a very proud man. His pride was so strong that he considered himself obliged to take responsibility even though he could not control the circumstances. He had lost desire to live after killing his father and marriage with his mother " Lost! Ah lost! At last it's blazing clear. Light of my days, go dark. I want to gaze no more. My birth all sprung revealed from those it never should, myself entwined with those I never could. And I the killer of those I never would." (Sophocles, page 67). Pride of Oedipus was one of his biggest flaws, he considered himself greater than gods and he was punished because of his pride because he was

not able to overcome higher forces that were stronger than human beings even endowed by certain amount of power. His fate could be stopped if he had not killed anyone but Oedipus was not able to control his anger and it caused the tragedy. Sometimes Oedipus behaved himself as if he were a god, he was very quick in judging people including himself, " But I, Oedipus who stumbled here without a hint, could snuff her out by human wit, not taking cues from the birds." (Sophocles page 23). Oedipus was too proud to realize that he was not to blame in what he did he refused to accept the circumstances.

While Oedipus was just a pawn in hands of powerful gods, Willie Loman was entangled in the web of his own illusions; his reason was stolen by his ambitions. He believed that a person can be happy only being successful. He did not understand that his possibilities were limited and he is just a common man. It is similar with Oedipus' attitude to life who considered himself stronger than gods. Willie also could not overcome his fate to be just ordinary man and he was not able to resign himself with this fact. He tried to take care of his family but he did not understand that he caused a lot of pain to his close people by his unwillingness to accept what he could do and what he could not. He did not notice how sad his wife Linda was supporting every day his unreachable plans. Willie's sons lost their identity and exposed their future to danger because they were brought up in the atmosphere of constant chase of success.

Travelling through the country selling his goods Willie tried to meet the image of himself that he created in his mind. In reality he was a senile

salesman who was not able to work as effectively as he did when he was younger. But he does not want to give up on his dream. He has many problems in everyday life however he is not able to understand that he himself causes them. Willie's main problem was his eagerness to live the American dream and it had rather simple solution just to change his life standards and to be satisfied with what he had. But he preferred difficult solution because he did not want to overcome his ambitions like Oedipus who also was not able to accept situation and forgive himself.

Linda lived in hell just because of the fact that she was Willie's wife. She spent her days alone worrying about Willie. It is hard to imagine her feelings when she learnt about Willie's suicidal intentions. She supported him on every step and she was not to blame that she could not get through to him. Linda deserved more respect than she received from Willie. While Linda spent her time worrying about her husband welfare he enjoyed in company of numerous mistresses. She showed her real emotions, her anger, and pain only once when her sons returned home from the restaurant.

All people aspire to be successful regardless of nationality, ability to dream is important for human existence. But when success is the main priority the results can be disastrous. "Death of Salesman" unmasking wrong dreams and expectations. Willie was eager to follow the footsteps of Uncle Ben and achieve successful career. He made fatal mistake staking on the wrong values, the reason of his failure was his obsession of his illusions dreams. However, Willie does not want to change his outlook, his unwillingness to change is his tragic flaw that takes him down. He has very firm beliefs as for

what he wants to be and who his children have to be. He wants to be a salesman and nothing else. " I thought I'd go out with my older brother and try to locate him, and maybe settle in the North with the old man. And I almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House... and he was eighty-four years old, and he drummed out merchandise in thirty-one states... he'd pick up the phone and call the buyers, and without even leaving his room, at the age of eight-four, he made his living" (Miller, *Death...* 81). When Willie was younger he had a chance to change his life and become like his brother Ben but he preferred not to do it. He saw himself only as a salesman.

If he has used his faithfulness to his dreams in right direction he would become very successful man but he finished his life tragically broken by his own ambitions.

American system can provide many forms of success as well as failures. The Lomans are the pattern of what life is like when a person lives in illusion and never advances his knowledge in anything. Willie's brother Ben is the exception in the Loman family; he was the only member who achieved success. Charlie and his son Bernard were also able to be successful and use the system for their needs. Therefore the decision if American system works for a person is ironically up to the individual. (Linderholm)

Finishing this essay it is important to mention about a structure of a tragedy and particularly the structure of these plays. Aristotle's theory of tragedy gives following definition of a tragedy:



“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.” (Halliwell 56)

Aristotle admired Sophocles' “Oedipus the King” he thought that it was wonderful tragedy. It is not surprising because this play fits perfectly to his theory of tragedy. The plot of “Oedipus the King” is a “whole” containing beginning (incentive moment), the middle (climax), and the end (resolution). Incentive moment - plague and promise of Oedipus, climax - stories of Herdsman and Messenger, resolution - departure of Oedipus ends plague. The plot of “Oedipus the King” is complete and structurally self-contained. A plot can be simple having only “change of fortune” (catastrophe) or complex that contains both “reversal of intentions” (peripeteia) and “recognition” (anagnorisis) connected with catastrophe. “Oedipus the King” has complex plot” peripeteia - Messenger arrives from Corinth: Polybus is not real father of Oedipus, anagnorisis - stories of Messenger and Herdsman, catastrophe - reporting of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-blinding, scene of suffering with Oedipus, Creon and children. All the actions of the play are united and interrelated.

Works cited

<https://assignbuster.com/willie-ioman-and-oedipus-as-tragic-heroes-as-defined-by-aristotle-essay-sample/>

Sophocles. (1988) *Oedipus the King*. New York: Oxford University Press

Halliwel, Stephen. *Aristotle's "Poetics"*. University of Chicago Press. 1999

Linderholm, Karl. *The American Dream*. 1995 Available at

<http://members.aol.com/sunny2345/stories.html>

Miller, Arthur. *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages*.

Cambridge University Press. 2005