

# To what extent is Willy Loman a tragic hero essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Tragic heroes derive from the Greeks, but Shakespeare adapted his own genre for tragedy. Most Shakespearean tragedies all fit the same pattern, which is that the protagonist is of noble birth and have a fatal character flaw which usually leads to their demise. Arthur Miller took Shakespeare's ideas for what a tragic hero should be and made them relevant to this time period. One particular critic thought, " a contemporary audience can no longer accept that a tragic hero is punished by comic force...

A tragedy must be brought about by... recognisable social factors. " 1This means that the factors of Shakespearean and Aristotelian tragedies are outdated for a modern day audience, audiences cannot accept that the protagonist falls due to a higher power, it must be something they can relate to or understand. Willy Loman is a struggling salesman around the age of sixty. He lives with his wife Linda and two sons Biff and Happy. Willy does not fit the usual criteria established by Shakespearean or Aristotelian tragedies.

Firstly, he is not of noble birth, although in the play Miller makes a link known to the audience because Willy is made to appear of noble birth as he is in fact referred to as, " a prince", by his son. Miller commented, " I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were". 2 This gives us clear insight why Willy is still a tragic hero even if he is not of high social ranking or status.

It allows us to see that Miller believed that it is just as tragic, if not more, to see " the common man" fall from grace because it is more real and relatable to the audience. Another difference between Miller and Shakespeare's tragedies is that Shakespeare's heroes were motivated by lust, greed and

ambition, whereas Willy is simply determined to live the 'American Dream'. During the 1940's, the 'American Dream' was something every 'ordinary man' strived to achieve.

Willy had a stunted image of the 'American Dream', he believed wholeheartedly in the success and easy wealth it claimed to give. It could be said that this is the key view which makes Willy a tragic hero because if you were to compare themes from 'Death of a Salesman' to a traditional tragedy such as Romeo and Juliet then you could say that "fate" is what killed Willy, he is a victim of his times and never had any other option but to die for his dreams.

Miller tried to produce an 'ordinary man' in the creation of Willy, he wanted to create a character that represented millions of 'ordinary' anonymous people. Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' could also be compared to other tragedies, such as Shakespeare's "Macbeth". Following Shakespeare's traditional genre of tragedy Macbeth gains the title of King. He speaks about his anguish and guilt before murdering Duncan and realises his mistakes whereas Willy is blind to his downfall to the end, "I always knew one way or another we were gonna make it".

This tells us that Willy believes by ending his life he has allowed his family to live the 'American Dream', which again makes him more of a tragic hero. One critic thought, "Willy worked for others all his life... yet all this added up to was the opportunity to throw it away". I believe this is an aspect of a tragic hero because his overall intentions were good, he worked hard to

provide for his family, yet the dream that was so important to him ended up being his downfall.

At the beginning of the play we learn of Willy's car accidents, Linda asks, "you didn't smash the car, did you", this is significant as later the audience learn that Linda believes Willy is attempting to commit suicide and his constant "accidents" are in fact deliberate. It is also significant as it foreshadows Willy's suicide at the end of the play. Throughout the play Willy's emotional and mental state is constantly deteriorating, this is exceptionally clear to the audience when Willy imagines his dead brother Ben and starts having a conversation with him, "I'm getting awfully tired, Ben".

Whenever Willy seems to be struggling to cope with the present situation he reverts back to the past and his sanity depletes as he begins to see his brother Ben. Willy's flashbacks are key to understanding the play. Willy kills himself because he believes that his death will end his family's money troubles and help his son Biff start a business, which in itself could be seen as honourable and heroic, but this aspect is also relatable for the audience because all parents want to give their children a better life.

It is tragic because he believed in the 'American Dream' so much that he sacrificed himself in order for his dream to come true for his sons. From the flashbacks throughout the play we learn that Biff and Willy used to be close, "missed you every minute". However, in the present tense there appears to be an unspoken issue between the two characters, "That selfish, stupid..."

which caused Biff to leave home as soon as he could. This gives the audience a sense of foreshadowing as the issue between Willy and Biff must come into light at some point and it does.

Willy's affair with the 'Woman' shows his flaws and his weaknesses, the audience may dislike him for his indiscretion but I believe his flashback to the affair and his anger at Linda about trying to fix her stockings, which are a symbol of his desperation to provide for his family and be financially secure, shows him as a tragic hero because he feels a sense of shame and guilt for his actions, "I'll make it all up to you, Linda." Music is also heard throughout the play, it is used to represent Willy's inability to focus on reality.

Willy's constant reluctance to live in the present is another cause for his demise and the fact that he does not learn from his mistakes which ultimately makes him a tragic hero. He never comes to terms with reality and appears to live in the past which is what clouds his judgement in the present. Things are not going well for Willy but he cannot manage to see that as his past distorts his view, "Oh I'll knock 'em dead next week... I'm very well liked in Hartford". This is a juxtaposition of views because Willy claims he is very popular and well liked all over the country, which is another sign of his delusion.

Willy can be seen as a realistic figure for the audience because many people in society struggle to focus on the present and live in the past. Whenever Willy has a flashback it is usually of him and his boys, Biff and Happy. Willy appears to favour Biff, "terrific job, boys. Good work, Biff", more than Happy,

who throughout the entire play seems desperate for his family's approval and attention, "I'm gonna get married, Mom. I wanted to tell you". This links back to the key theme of the play, 'The American Dream' because for a man to be living the 'Dream' he would need a wife.

It also relates to Willy being a tragic hero because since his children were young he has always wanted them to achieve 'The American Dream'. At the end of a tragedy the other characters usually learn from the protagonist's mistakes, whereas Miller has adapted his own tragedy to fit reality. People don't always learn from other people's mistakes, which is true of Happy, "I'm gonna show you... Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have".

This is a clear sign that he is still deluding himself and has not learnt anything from his father's tragic death. However, Biff helps create Willy as a tragic hero, because he does learn that Willy's beliefs which he clung to desperately all his life were not actually that important, "He has the wrong dreams". From this we can see that Biff has learned from his father's tragic death, finally understanding what Willy failed to, which is that there are more important things in life than being well liked and than living 'The American Dream'.

Biff's realisation of Willy's downfall could be considered as a sense of catharsis, as for Biff everything is clear now. This links in to the aspect of Willy being a tragic hero as with the traditional genre the audience and other characters gain a sense of catharsis. To conclude I would describe Willy as a

modern day tragic hero due to the trials and tribulations he endured in order to give his family the dream he was never able to achieve.