

Is tragedy possible in the modern society depicted in death of a salesman?

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



Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* can be measured against Aristotle's notions of tragedy expressed in his *Poetics*, involving a fall caused by hamartia and hubris, and an eventual recognition and reversal of fortune, culminating in the audience experience of catharsis. [1] Despite this enduring model for tragedy, Willy Loman, the central character of the play, is not necessarily a tragic hero in this sense, and does not fulfill all the above criteria. Arguably then, Miller is presenting a modern society in which tragedy has no place, and indeed, is not possible. On the other hand, this classical concept of tragedy is not appropriate for modern society, and other measures of the Tragic, or a reinterpretation of tragedy may be what Miller is presenting.

A fundamental feature of Aristotelean tragedy is a tragic hero of high standing, who makes a mistake, hamartia, causing a fall from grace. It can be argued that Miller's drama asserts this improbability of attaining high status in his plays *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, as neither protagonist comes from a particularly elevated background. In *Death of a Salesman*, Linda makes clear Willy's inability to meet this requirement: 'I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being (...) Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person' [2] Whilst this isn't tragic in the Aristotelean sense, *Death of a Salesman* can be seen as a more 'democratic tragedy'. Willy may be nothing special, but he is a human being, and thus the tragedy is our humanity and our ultimate insignificance. The failure of 'attention (...) paid to such a person' in the play, culminating in Willy's suicide reveals the craving for '

attention' in the socioeconomic capitalist system in which monetary wealth measures the 'greatness' of a person. Miller asserts the improbability of reaching a high status, and the precarious, and indeed, ultimately unfulfilling and irrelevant, status financial authority gives; this can be seen in Willy's suicide at the end of the play, despite the family having paid off the mortgage. Nevertheless, the tragedy of the loss of selfhood and therefore inability to meet Aristotelean criteria for tragedy is tragic in itself. Miller reimagines tragedy in a more complex modern form, shifting between person and culture and examining their influences on each other (imitating the tensions of democracy), thus reflecting the perils of capitalism. Feminist critic Linda Kintz has noted that *Death of a Salesman* offers 'a nostalgic view of the plot of the universalized masculine protagonist of the *Poetics*', critiquing both the treatment of women in the play, and the notion of Aristotelean tragedy itself as an inherently flawed and limiting concept. [3] Linda is marginalized from the capitalist power systems, which give value and status, and thus devaluing her. Furthermore, Linda is characterized as a subservient housewife, as elucidated in Happy's response to her hanging his washing, 'What a woman! They broke the mould when they made her.' [4] The mold of Aristotelean tragedy has been broken, yet both society and Miller still inadvertently assert the improbability of a truly 'democratic' Tragedy in modernity via the application of male value systems.

The hamartia, or mistake, required in Greek Tragedy, is frequently caused by hubris, excessive pride or confidence. Willy's character teeters on the edge between self-delusional and self-assured, making assertions such as, 'I

am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!’[5] This self-confidence is undermined by his use of an economic metaphor, highlighting the fact that he is indeed, ‘ a dime a dozen’, used and discarded by the capitalist system, and rendering his insistence baseless. Whilst the process of naming is often a moment of self-definition and power, such as in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, ‘ This is I, Hamlet the Dane’, the gradual fragmentation of Willy’s mind and diminishing sense of self and grip on reality, causes these words of attempted self-definition to be meaningless. As Miller himself has commented: ‘ But he was agonised by his awareness of being in a false position, so constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in, so aware, in short, that he must somehow be filled in his spirit or fly apart, that he staked his very life on the ultimate assertion.’[6] Willy’s ‘ false position’ is conveyed through fantasy narrative, including his stories of his brother and father, claiming ‘ we’ve got quite a little streak of self-reliance in our family’. Willy is thus telling an approving narration of his life. In some ways, Willy can be seen as lacking hubris, as a self-delusional and pitiful character. Alternatively his blindness and folly can also be viewed as a major character flaw. In some ways, Willy is depicted as a modern day King Lear, with his blindness to reality causing him to be flung into madness. [7] Nevertheless, his appeal to his boss, Howard, reveals an insightful critique of capitalism, ‘ You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit!’ This declaration comes across as strangely pathetic due to the tension between Willy’s assertions and desperate begging for a job. [8] Likewise, Willy’s egotistical image of his financial success and hero-worshipping sons in the first act reveals his

insecurity of failing to achieve the 'American Dream'. Schlöndorff's presentation of this scene in bright, garish colors in his 1985 film production of *Death of a Salesman* conveys the constructed and false nature of this daydream. [9] Perhaps it is this ongoing tension between failed potential and reality, and refusal to face the obvious truth, that is the source of Willy's hamartia as he embodies the word's literal translation of 'missing the mark.' This consequently causes the discretization of his character and his downfall. Indeed, Willy is literally fallen, often found slumped over, on his knees, and 'beaten down'. [10] Matthew Roudané comments that 'Miller presents no fewer than twenty-five scenes in which Willy's body language and dialogue create images of the fall, the falling, or the fallen.' [11] It is in flashback, at the end of the scene when Biff discovers Willy's affair that we are given the stage direction 'Willy is left on the floor on his knees', a movement that is prophetic of the downfall the Willy will later suffer. [12]

The 'improbable possibility of tragedy' is most clear in *Death of a Salesman* due to the lack of obvious anagnorisis, and Willy appears to have no moment of true recognition or revelation. Whilst there is the inevitable realization that his dreams of success will not materialize, Willy remains delusional throughout. In the last scene, the apparition of Ben appears, representing Willy's misconceptions of his worth and purpose, and culminates in the misguided sacrifice of his own life. Willy's had an overtly sentimentalized view of his own death: 'Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket? (...) It's very smart, you realise that, don't you, sweetheart?' [13] In actuality, Willy represents the inhuman,

hollow, and perverse logic of the American Dream. A failure to sell his products has resulted in his failure to 'sell himself', yet his suicide for life insurance money is ultimately a delusional disregard for what he did have—the love of his family. His perceived 'magnificence' of monetary wealth is a result of his self-value being placed in a capitalist framework. If anything, the epiphany of the play comes from Biff, who comments that Willy 'never knew who he was.' [14] This insight exposes Willy's continual under appreciation of himself, including his erroneous motives for suicide. Thus, Willy has no anagnorisis, and does not even succeed in the individual's quest for personal dignity and integrity that can be said to be characteristic of the modern tragic hero. Willy remains until his death 'a man distracted from human necessities by public myths', ignoring the true love and care of his family in order to chase the illusion of the American Dream. [15]

It can be said, however, that catharsis is present in *Death of a Salesman*. The last lines of the play, in the Requiem, are Linda's 'We're free... we're free...' [16] This 'freedom' perfectly expresses the purging of emotions felt at the end of the play, and even the characters themselves feel the relief of the pressure of Willy's ideals, failures and expectations. Parallel to this is the pity and fear evoked by Willy's suicide. Willy's struggle to find himself is universalized, as Miller comments: 'I think Willy Loman is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life which the machine civilisation deprives people of. He is looking for his selfhood, for his immortal soul' [17] The sympathy for Willy's suffering, combined with the audience's acute fear of the possibility of experiencing this themselves, leave a collected feeling of both pathos and a

determination to avoid the same fate as the characters. The meta-theatrics of Willy's bad performance as a character in the role of a salesman that both society and he has constructed, urges the audience to not live in bad faith. This aligns with Yeats assertion that 'tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man'. [18] Thus, the catharsis has a unifying effect, which is necessary in a modern, individualistic society, and technological 'machine civilisation' which has an isolating effect. All the same, as Leech points out, Willy is not tragic in the Aristotelian sense, as 'he is the victim of the American dream rather than of the human condition'. [19] Whilst the themes of family cohesion and death are universal, the specific causes of Willy's tragedy, and the audience's feelings of catharsis, rely on an understanding of a specific, geographically located, socio-cultural and economic situation. Therefore, through catharsis, Miller asserts the ability and need for tragedy in modern society, but a tragedy that is not Aristotelian in genre, rather a re-imagined modern style of tragedy.

Ultimately, Death of a Salesman does not render tragedy implausible. Instead, Miller encompasses both ancient and contemporary ideas of tragedy and of tragic heroism. Whilst 'the play embodies, for many, the peripeteia, hamartia, and hubris that Aristotle found essential for all great tragedies', this can also be contested. Miller undoubtedly, does not find these 'essential': Willy Loman is a 'low man' and his anagnorisis and peripeteia are delusions, not genuine realizations of his mistakes or of larger truths. Death of a Salesman is a descent into artificial

constructions and performance, continued even after Willy's death with Linda preserving this falsehood in her questioning of why no one attended his funeral. Thus, the characters remained unmoved, and it is the audience who experience the 'afterwash of the tragic', a 'false consciousness (...) being broken into by real consciousness'. [20] This effect of *Death of a Salesman* reflects the influence and primary aim of Tragedy in both its ancient and modern contexts, to evoke response in the audience and consumer.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Aristotle, 'Poetics' in *Classical Literary Criticism*, T Dorsch, ed., trans., (London: Penguin, 1965)

Miller, Arthur, *Death of a Salesman*, (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1961), p. 40, 52, 61-62, 65, 107, 111, 112, 121.

Shakespeare, *King Lear*, R. A. Foakes, ed., (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1997).

Secondary Sources

Bigsby, C. W. E., *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, (Cambridge University Press, 21 Dec 2000), Online resource: Google Books, last accessed 15 Feb 2015, p. 86.

Death of a Salesman, dir. Volker Schlöndorff, perf. Dustin Hoffman, (CBS, 1985). Film.

Kintz, Linda, " The Sociosymbolic Work of Family in Death of a Salesman" in Matthew C. Roudane (ed.)

Approaches to Teaching Miller's Death of a Salesman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995), p. 106.

Leech, Clifford, Tragedy, (Routledge: 1969), p. 38.

Miller, Arthur, Conversations with Arthur Miller, Matthew Roudane, ed., Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1 Jan 1987, Online resource: Google Books, last accessed 15 Feb 2015, p. 38.

Miller, Arthur, Introduction to Collected Plays, (New York and London: 1958), pp. 31-6.

Roudané, Matthew, ' Death of a Salesman and the Poetics of Arthur Miller' in The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller, ed. Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, London: 22 Apr 2010, Online resource: Google Books, last accessed 15 Feb 2015.

Yeats, ' The Tragic Theatre (1910)', in Essays and Explorations (London: Macmillan 1961), pp. 238-45.