

Death of a salesman essay



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Arthur Miller presents his play 'Death of a Salesman' in the ancient form of a tragedy.

Aristotle has defined his idea of the 'perfect' tragedy in his text, 'Poetics' (350 BC). Here he suggests that the protagonist must fall from an elevated social standing as a result of a "fatal flaw" within the character; the fall from the main character creates resolution to the play which is seen as just; finally, Aristotle identified that the action of the drama should take place within a 24-hour timeframe. An ancient play which is believed to be the perfect tragedy is Oedipus Rex by Sophocles. 'Death of a Salesman' is definitely a tragic play, but is Willy Loman, the main protagonist, a tragic hero? According to Aristotle a tragic hero must possess 'Megalopsychia', otherwise known as an elevated status. Willy Loman is an unsuccessful salesman of the late 1940s.

He is not perceived to be 'great' or 'noble' such as other characters in traditional tragedies including Oedipus Rex, Macbeth and Hamlet all of whom are kings. Willy's last name "Loman" can be seen as significant as it may be seen as a pun (low). Arthur Miller's intentions for doing this would be to show how he meaningfully gave his protagonist a low status and in his essay 'Tragedy and the common man', he argues that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were". This is an element of modern tragedies, for the protagonist to be anti-heroes and of a normal social class. Secondly, the Greek characteristic 'Hamartia' must be present. Willy Loman's Hamartia is seen to be his delusions which cause his failure in life.

It is his that delusions cause him to misunderstand his job and his family, getting the truth and his dream confused as one. His dream can be compared to ‘ the American dream’ which is a conception that any man can become something great so long as he has confidence and perseverance, an idea that is incorporated within his play. This may be true, however Willy Loman does not have the drive to succeed, and neither does he have the personality to succeed in business. At age 63 he still believes he is popular, respected and good looking which Linda, his wife, encourages throughout the play.

Statements such as “ you’re the best looking man in the world” which supports his false beliefs. His unpopularity can be seen within the requiem when few people turned up to his funeral besides his close family who love him, all of which he pushed away including Linda, who he deceived. Willy also obtains an idea that image is equal to success. This is known to be his hubris; excessive pride. He takes pride in material objects “ Riding on a smile and a shoe shine... personality wins the day” shows how he puts his faith into his personal appearance, and how he appears to smile on the outside but fails to admit that he isn’t on the inside. He thinks personality can be judged on what he says, but forgets that it ‘ shines’ through when he speaks.

I won’t have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out”. The stockings can be seen as a representative of Loman’s unfaithfulness as a husband as the sight of them brings back memories of when Biff caught him cheating on Linda and found out the Willy had given ‘ the woman’ the expensive stockings he was supposed to give his wife as a gift. Willy Loman’s reasoning behind doing this may be because he didn’t want to come across

as 'low' to his mistress, so by giving her expensive stockings out of the blue it gives off the appearance that he has money and is spontaneous. Modern domestic tragedies also have their own elements including materialism. The Peripetia or 'turning point' of the play may be seen when Willy Loman loses his job with Howard, refuses the job offer from Charley and is confronted by Biff about the misconceptions that have dominated their lives since Happy and Biffs' childhood.

He rejects Charley's offer because of his ego and also refused to borrow money from him. This other offer, to Willy, would have been a bigger humiliation and would have been a knock on his self esteem "do not insult me". Arguably the ultimate turning point of the play is when Loman gets fired as this then leads to his Anagnorisis. Willy gets fired as he isn't a good business man, partly due to his exhaustion after working there for 34 years but also his lack of compatibility with his chosen career. The business industry shows no room for compassion for individuals as Howard explains it as "business is business."

"Willy wasn't producing anything of worth to his company and therefore leads to his realization. This moment in the play is his Anagnorisis. He does not say it directly, but as an audience we can see that he realizes he will never succeed in business. If he hadn't have acknowledged this, he would not have ended his life. This element can also apply to other characters within the play, rather than the protagonist. We see this moment of realization within Biff in act two when he addresses his father as "a phony little fake", before this Biff has seen Willy as a role model and looks up to him.

When he discovers he has been disloyal to his mother, this tears apart at the seams and thus destroying their relationship. In a tragedy, the moment of catharsis can be seen as the most important; it is the audience's moment of emotional release. This moment is constructed in Willy's death which reflects his Anagnorisis as it is due to love, something missing within his character throughout the play. This causes emotional release within the audience as it saddens us to see that the protagonist feels as though he has to take his life in order to undo his wrongs. Irony is held within the requiem when Linda says "Willy, I made the last payment on the house today."

This is particularly emotional for the audience as we have seen their struggle with money, and we've watched Willy's exhaustion increase due to this. It is sad to see this resolved after his death and we now feel sympathy towards him. Fate is an important role within tragedies, modern or ancient. Within Oedipus Rex, the main character's parents are told of a prophecy involving their son, which they tried to avoid.

Comparing this to Death of a Salesman, we can see that the characters are not directly told of the future and arguably the final events of the play may not be seen as fate but instead an outcome of the character's flaws. For example, the Loman family noticed Willy's abnormal behavior but chose to ignore it. His death is foreshadowed in the play through his attempted suicides; it is obvious that Willy needs help yet his loved ones fail to seek it for him. An element of fate may be seen through the title of the play as Arthur Miller called it Death of a salesman, here we are known that a salesman will die, and then in Act one we are immediately introduced to the salesman; Willy Loman. So is this fate or a terrible outcome of his family's

ignorance? Well, a tragic hero should never have control over his own fate. In Greek tragedies they were ruled over by the Gods and in Othello, the protagonist was manipulated by a sinister character named Iago.

This is also applied to Death of Salesman as although he has control over his actions he seems to have no control over his mental state and in fact, he is doomed. We see him undergoing a snowball effect throughout the play. We can see the later events as inevitable, “ these arch supports are killing me”. His lack of control is evident within his daytime hallucinations and him slipping into old speeches at inappropriate times. Death of a Salesman (although it fits many of the elements) cannot be perceived as an Aristotelian tragedy, although we must note that tragedy does not end with Aristotle’s definition. Willy Loman may neither be noble nor heroic, he has more than one tragic flaw and the play doesn’t take place within a 24 hour time frame.

However, I feel he is most definitely a tragic hero as this expression should be allowed to evolve with time along with the modern audience. is and procrastination; Willy’s failure to change. He also goes through alienation which can be clearly seen through the conversations he holds with himself throughout the play.