

# Explain why Willy Loman is or is not a tragic hero essay sample

[Literature](#), [Drama](#)



Throughout the course of the drama, Willy Loman, a delusional salesman sinks lower into his depression and confusion, until he eventually ends his life. There has been much discussion on whether 'Death of a Salesman' is a tragedy, and if Willy is a tragic hero. Many critics question the supposedly tragic elements of the drama, citing Aristotle's definition of tragedy, and Shakespearean examples. Willy is often compared to King Lear, however it is often suggested that his misfortune pales in comparison to the well known tragic heroes. Arthur Miller considered Willy a tragic hero and as author, his opinions should be taken into account. Willy evokes pity and fear from the audience, and suffers due to his own fatal flaw, or hamartia, which Elia Kazan, the first director of 'Death of a Salesman', believed to be "neuroses and anxiety."

Literary critic, Professor Harold Bloom claims that Willy Loman is not a tragic hero by Aristotelian standards because he "does not fall from a great height, nor does he come to any realization of his complicity in the event."

Traditionally tragic heroes are men of high standing, princes, kings and generals, who fail and eventually die due to a fatal flaw, or hamartia.

Aristotle would not have considered 'Death of a Salesman' a tragedy, because a tragedy must show a person who is worth serious attention. Willy Loman, an 'Everyman', is not worth the attention given him. However, as Miller himself pointed out, Shakespearean and Greek Tragedies were "enacted by royal beings but... apply to everyone in similar emotional situations." In the past stories had been written about characters of high standing, that were looked up to by the general public. Arthur Miller asked the important question, why?

Why does a story have to be about someone who, buy luck at birth, is royal? The everyday man worries as much about his own personal problems, be they large or small, as a prince may worry about his. Willy Loman's issues in the drama were very important to him, literally a matter of life or death. Miller questions the right a critic has to place the importance of a man's life on a scale according to his nobility, or lack there of. The element that makes a man a tragic hero is not the height from which he falls, but more importantly the fall itself and the reasons behind it.

Arthur Miller believed that the tragedy of Willy Loman came from how he lived, and why he died. In an interview with the New York Times, he said, " it is tragic that a man can live his life in illusion." Willy does not acknowledge, or even see, reality, in the dream world he has created, where he is powerful, successful and admired. Miller makes a social comment on the value that American society puts on success and on making a mark in the world. Willy believes himself to be the only man who cannot reach this goal of popularity and accomplishment, yet he does not understand how to succeed. He knows men do, and this is shown by his description of and conversation with Ben, who fulfils the American dream of easy success. Willy doesn't know how Ben got to where he was, only that he did. This lack of understanding means Willy cannot go on in reality because he doesn't know what is wanted. His differentiation between ' liked' and ' well-liked' is an important facet of his character because he knows that a successful man is well-liked, so assumably, a well-liked man is, or will be, successful.

He cannot see the steps it takes to become successful, and this forces him to pretend that he is flourishing. According to Martin Gottfried, author of “Arthur Miller”, Willy Loman lies, to make himself sound successful, and becomes entrapped in his own lie. As he gets older his lies are less believable and he finds his web of small untruths falling down around him forcing him to find ways to escape from them, at first by imagining that the lies are true or remembering a time when everyone, especially his sons, believed in him and looked up to him, and eventually he truly escapes the tangle, by killing himself. Willy decides that the \$20 000 life insurance will do his family more good than he will alive. He believes he has wasted his life, and that the only good thing about it is that he can leave his family money, if he dies. The tragedy of Willy’s death is not that he kills himself, but that “ he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it.” (Arthur Miller)

Elia Kazan wrote that on viewing ‘ Death of a Salesman’ the audience should feel “ Pity, compassion and terror for Willy”, as the embodiment of their fears for themselves and their own fathers. Willy’s failure in life and heart-rending death are as relevant to an audience as any noble’s struggles. Whether his fatal flaws were neuroses and anxiety, or a total misunderstanding of society and success, his depression and confusion were not due to foolish decisions and conclusions, but were a result of something rooted in his soul. This follows the pattern set long ago by Aristotle and despite Willy’s low rank among men, his is a tragic story, because although he faces his life as best he can, due to his own hamartia, he cannot surpass the obstacles. Willy is a

tragic hero, one who can teach an audience much about society and expectations.