

# Exploring tragedy between the eras



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From its conception in ancient Greece, tragedy has always lured its audience through its observation and analysis of the human condition in its most noble and pitiful moments, eliciting all-consuming emotions. Traditional tragedy, such as Sophocles' famed play *Oedipus Rex*, represents the pinnacle of tragic works, incorporating the most core qualities of a work of its genre. The play follows the descending journey of Oedipus, King of Thebes, as he relentlessly pursues the identity of the late King Laius' murderer, ignorant to the fact that he had slain his father before ascending to the throne. On the other hand, Arthur Miller's contemporary work *Death of a Salesman* appears particularly different from the Grecian's foundational drama. Miller depicts the rapidly spiraling Willy Loman, an unsuccessful salesman, as he struggles to acknowledge the dismal reality that involves bleak financial times and crumbling familial relations. Despite their very different veneers, the protagonists of the two plays do, in fact, share similarities that exemplify the definition of a tragic hero, as well as exhibiting some differences. Through examining the heroes' flawed characters, falls from grace, and final fate, one can identify the common qualities of tragedy that have prevailed through the passage of time, but also observe its evolution in response to the modern world.

Both Oedipus and Loman demonstrate a sort of willed blindness/ignorance. Oedipus lacks the "clear vision which" would "[enable] him to examine every side of a matter with unclouded eyes and to see all things in due perspective" (Barstow 3). He discounts the numerous signs indicating his involvement, even ignorantly dismissing the most conspicuous warning - Jocasta's declaration that she hopes he never discovers who he is.

Unclouded eyes also plague Willy. In fact, Loman is consumed by dreaming, so much so that he can no longer differentiate reality and dreams, in some cases. He exhibits this confusion early on, when he talks about driving to the country and swears that he “ was driving that Chevvy” from back in nineteen twenty-eight (Miller 8). In another instance, Willy’s conversation with Charley bleeds into an imaginary conversation regarding achievement of financial success with his dead brother Ben. These occasions demonstrate both characters’ ignorance in the face of some grander power; in Loman’s case, he is ignorant to the superficiality of his beliefs of the American dream and business success. The dreaming that consumes him emphasizes a frivolous definition of success and highlighted the importance of being well-liked. In Oedipus’s case, he is ignorant, almost opposed, to the whole truth, leading to “ unthinking haste” that “ furnishes the first thread in the complication” (Barstow 3). Oedipus’ resistance to knowledge and adherence to ignorance facilitates his tendency to jump to conclusions, such as when talking to Teiresias. He immediately accuses the blind seer of having killed Laius, simply because of the prophet’s reluctance to reveal the truth for Oedipus’s sake. Furthermore, this hastiness and thoughtless energy that champions ignorance foster this forgetfulness to consider the other facts/stories.

Pride mars the character of both Oedipus and Willy as well. A telling pair of moments occurs when Oedipus discusses the resolution of a tumultuous time for the people of Thebes. At the beginning of the play, he attributes the resolution of the Sphinx’s tyranny to “ God’s assistance” (45); however, later on, he is unable to conceal his pride and boasts about how he “ knew nothing, and [he] stopped her./ [he] solved the riddle by [his] wit alone”

(Sophocles 434-45). Willy, too, demonstrates stubborn pride when he defends his character, ironically, by putting up a façade to his family. He consistently lies to them, boasting about nonexistent successes.

Furthermore, this deep-seated pride reveals itself when he feels “insulted” by and refuses the job offer from Charley, who had suggested it in an attempt to elevate Willy from his state of lowness (29). All of Willy’s inherent need to be liked and desire for prominence arise from this one single sin: pride. Just as Oedipus’s:

...purposes are good. His emotions, his thoughts, even his errors, have an ardent generosity which stirs our deepest sympathy. But his nature is plainly imperfect, as Aristotle says the nature of a tragic hero should be, and from the beginning he was not likely to attain perfect happiness. (Barstow 3)

Loman, like Oedipus, also has a “plainly imperfect” nature wherein pride creates a pitfall. In an attempt to protect his pride, Willy’s mind “edits and revises reality” (Moseley). This aspect “of his character...[moves] him inexorably in” the direction of catastrophe (Moseley). The influence of attribution – specifically a rash and prideful personality – also contributes to Oedipus’s unfortunate fate; his short-temper and arrogance leads him to kill his father for not letting him pass on the road and his brash unwillingness to stop the search despite cautionary words from Teiresias.

Toting one of the most notable tragic falls from grace, Oedipus plunges from the position of noble and respected King of Thebes to the truth – the estranged son of the late King, and now wedded to his mother. He has cursed himself and inflicted a great misfortune unto his family, so

unfathomable that he blinds himself because he cannot bear the sins he has committed against the city and his parents. Oedipus's fall is, thus, one of very defined heights and elevations. On the other hand, Willy's fall seems almost nonexistent in comparison. However, Loman does experience a fall from grace; he falls from "an imagined height," wherein the building blocks of his position of elevation are composed of his superficial values and misinterpretation of the American Dream, but it is a fall nonetheless (Jacobson 247). From this lens, Loman's fall mirrors Oedipus's, in that he had a position of dignity (albeit imagined), but the truth of reality tears him away, condemning him to a grim ending. Despite the aforementioned numerous similarities between the tragic narratives of Oedipus and Willy, their final fate as a result of their fall from grace underscores a profound difference in their characters. Loman's fall has already occurred, or has been initiated, in the very beginning of the dramatic work, whereas Oedipus's fall occurs at the very end, the very moment he learns the truth of his origins. The noteworthy difference lies in the fact that Oedipus achieves a sort of enlightenment, while Willy remains disillusioned and stranded in ignorance. Willy's truth, the transitory nature of popularity and triviality of the "modern" American Dream, is never realized; in fact, Loman seems oblivious to the deeper implication of his suppositions and thought pattern, dying in adherence to "values he barely understands," (Jacobson 247) clinging to his contradictions, and unable to see "through the illusion of his manifold dreams" (Moseley). Oedipus, on the other hand, has a moment of realization, an insight, wherein he gains knowledge of his hubris and ignorance, as well as the influence of fate. In this sense, Willy "[dies] happily deluded" (Heyen), while Oedipus must live with the sobering truth and bear its weight.

Although written during two very different eras, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* feature fundamental elements of a dramatic tragedy. For the protagonists of both plays, their flaws of ignorance and hubris ultimately induce their falls from grace that trigger a drastic reactionary act. Oedipus's ignorance lies in his willful blindness of his true self, despite clear evidence, while Willy's ignorance develops from an incongruence between dreams and reality. This difference emphasizes the modern tragedy of disillusionment and the novel definition of success, as compared to the antiquated standards of Sophocles' time. Furthermore, both works highlight a fall from grace, one of a noble and one of a common man. Their final state - either enlightened, but burdened with the knowledge of truth, or deluded and blissfully ignorant - underscores the evolution of what mankind labels as tragic.

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