

# Example of comparing oedipus with death of a salesman literature review

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Tragedy is among the common productions of drama. This means that some dramas take the form of tragedy, which basically means that they portray the downfall of a protagonist. Tragedy occurs as a result of some error in judgment or any other fatal error, leading to major suffering, but also important insights gained by the leading character. The main purpose of such tragedy is to elicit some emotions, fear or sympathy, in the audience. “Oedipus the King” and “Death of a Salesman” are among the most intriguing tragedies that have been produced. This paper is an analysis and comparison of the two tragedies.

There are some requirements that a drama should meet to be characterized as a tragedy. Among the criteria applied is that developed by Aristotle, which is commonly used to-date. This includes the evidence of a tragic hero, the *harmartia*, *peripeteia*, plot (p. 1203). In any tragedy, it is necessary that there is a tragic hero, who should be good and admirable. A tragic protagonist is usually drawn from among the noble authority, and one who holds a position of authority in his society. This is necessary as in any tragedy, the character should move from a higher to a lower position, through the suffering that must be endured. This is a fate that the protagonist cannot evade no matter how hard he tries. Besides holding the position of authority, the protagonist must be an extraordinary person. Additionally, according to Arthur Miller, tragedy can emanate from various aspects, but two important ideas must be evident; the tragic flaw of the character and the events surrounding the specific character (p. 1831). While each human is unique and presents unique flaws, in most cases, the flaws have been evident in various individuals over human history. The tragic

feeling is evoked in the efforts of the character to cheat destiny, which eventually catches up with him like is the case in "Death of a Salesman" and was evident in "Oedipus the King" before it. such elements are evident in the two plays.

There are various ideas that connect the two drama productions. They have protagonists who are similar, as well as supporting characters. They also relates to events that are similar providing significant comparative elements. Distance from factual reality is the fundamental element that characterizes the protagonists in the two plays. In "Death of a Salesman", Willy Loman is characterized as delusional and incoherent. He shows a high level of illusory vision of achievement and success which masks is connection to reality.

Many critics of the play have showed the character as a contemporary tragic hero. The tragedy in this case is based on his belief in the American Dream, which is an illusion. Similarly, Oedipus is a tragic hero, a quintessential one, who is also masked from the reality. His belief is based on some 'facts' that are later proven to be illusion, as the reality is proven as the play proceeds. Just like Loman, Oedipus lives far from the reality.

The two are protagonists are also revealed as struggling with their fate, the ultimate fall from the high to low. On the part of Oedipus, there is evidence of aggressive struggle against a prophecy that would unavoidably shape his life. He struggles to counter the oracle which predicted the role he played in the death of his father. Loman also sees his future and death as a failure, which he tries to escape by committing suicide. In the two plays, the two protagonists are generally good, but the two commits blunders that cost them mightily and cause them suffering; Loman commits suicide and

Oedipus blinds himself.

However, various ways are evident in which the two tragedies differ. Oedipus is committed to get the truth and facts but eventually realizes that he is blind to the reality. He is tragically destroyed after realizing that he is his father's murderer and has fathered children with his mother. Even with the complete sight and vision, he tries to blind himself: " Light of the sun, let me look upon you no more after today! I who first saw the light bred of a match accursed, and accursed in my living with them I live with, cursed in my killing" (Sophocles 1967, 163 cited in Kennedy & Gioia). The tragedy of Oedipus is that he is not prepared to sit back and passively wait for Thebes to undergo suffering, regardless the possibility of him suffering a horrific fate. He is prepared to lose his dignity as long as he gains dignity for Thebes.

On the contrary, the tragic flaw of Loman is evident in his incapacity to understand the illusions of " American dream" and capitalism. The character has spent most of his life travelling as a salesman. He was once a star salesman, but due to his aging, the company he has worked for a long time refuses his services. His sons cannot understand his ' reality.' however, just like Oedipus he has to struggle to ensure that his dream remains valid. This causes him to move into an entirely different world, where he has to keep on revisiting his better days. Also, just like Oedipus he is not prepared to accept help because this will mean that he has become weak. For instance, his wounded dignity will not allow home to accept a job offer from Charley. On being offered money for his insurance, he gets a agonizing insight, " Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and

the years, you end up worth more dead than alive” (Miller 1987, 98).

About 2400 years are past since Aristotle described the characteristics of a tragedy. He gave ‘ Oedipus the King” as a clear model of a tragedy.

Nonetheless, tragedies produced then and today have the same characteristics, as revealed in the similarities between the two plays analyzed in this paper. More than two millenia have gone by and tragedies are still being written and created. The modern example of a tragedy, “ Death of a Salesman” reveals that the tragedy had been and remains relevant over the years. After all, the fact is that tragedies are common struggles of humans and remains relevant today as they were during the time of Oedipus.

However, the differences between the two reveal that the genre has had to undergo some changes to adapt to the contemporary context. For instance, Aristotle provided a definition of a tragedy by considering the aspects of tragedies that were evident during the time, such as in “ Oedipus the King.” On the contrary, new contexts are evident in modern tragedies such as “ Death of a Salesman”, like in the concepts of capitalism.

### **Work Cited:**

Miller, Arthur. Death of a Salesman. Pearson Education India, 2007. Print.  
Kennedy X. J. & Gioia Dana. Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing, 12th Edition, Longman, 2001