

# Fences and death of a salesman essay

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



Are readers being too idealistic when they favor perfect heroes in stories over flawed ones? Authors August Wilson and Arthur Miller force readers to ponder the likeability of an imperfect protagonist through their characters. In *Fences* by August Wilson, the main character Troy is a struggling father and husband dealing with racial injustice in his life. His flaws are brought to light as he deals with being a good father in the eyes of himself and his children. In *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, Willy is a traveling salesman faced with a mental illness and a lack of business success, which compromises his position as both a father and a husband. Both Willy and Troy exemplify problematic qualities such as being unfaithful to their wives and burdening their kids with the failures of their past. Readers come to discover how tragic heroes can be more challenging to empathize with due to their imperfections.

Cheating on one's spouse is an unlikeable quality in anyone, and Willy and Troy are no exception. The tendencies of giving into temptations is often an issue many tragic heroes face. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy is constantly away from home, and his loneliness drives him to have an affair. This does not directly impact his relationship with his wife, but rather with that of his son, Biff. Initially, Biff looked up to Willy as a man of honor and respect in his life. One could say he even looks up to his father as an influential person. This causes their whole dynamic to spiral downwards. Bernard notices this change and credits Biff's lack of motivation to his trip to Boston to meet his father, " And he came back that month and took his sneakers-remover those sneakers with " The University of Virginia" printed on them? He was so proud of them he wore them every day. And he took them down in the cellar and

burned them up in the furnace”(Miller 91). The shoe symbolizes Biff’s idea of success. It also represents the struggling relationship between Willy and his son. Biff loses his own sense of self due to the fact that he learns of his father’s infidelity. Readers can more easily sympathize with Biff’s flaws at this moment, and it is easier for readers to cast aside Willy as an antagonist at this moment rather than deeming him a ‘hero’. Willy let a low point in his life get to him and this drove him to damage his relationship with someone he loved. In *Fences* by August Wilson, Troy goes through a similar struggle by giving into his temptations. To the outside eye, Troy and his wife Rose seem to have a healthy and loving relationship. They’ve figured out a system- Troy being the dreamer, and Rose as the realist is able to put Troy in his place. As readers dive further into the book and come to know more about Troy, this changes. Similar to Willy, Troy uses parenting struggles as justification for cheating on his wife, “ I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems... be a different man. I ain’t got to wonder how I’m gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed”(Wilson 69). Troy views his affair as a kind of an alternate reality. He is able to leave his present failures at home and walk into a new world where they cease to exist. The overpowering pressure he exerts on himself to provide for his family impacts him a negative way. Troy is living in a time, where a false sense of masculinity is wrongly imposed on men, and it winds up tearing apart families rather than supporting them. When Troy is at home and becomes aware of the necessities that come along with running one, he becomes blinded by endless duties he is unable to fulfill and is prevented from viewing the love at home that surrounds him. While a tragic hero may

be loved and appreciated by the people around them, they are blinded by the burden of overwhelming responsibilities they impose on themselves. Their internal turmoil consumes them until sources of optimism become symbols of struggle. Both Willy and Troy are clouded by their overbearing job as the man of the house, and it prompts them to cheat on their wives, thus ruining their family dynamic.

In both plays, an important theme is that of the complex relationship between a father and son. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy forces a false sense of success onto his sons rather than letting them develop one for themselves. In *Fences*, Troy goes through a similar internal struggle. For both characters, the pressures they personally feel as men of the house cause a more challenging relationship between them and their sons. Willy expresses his disappointment in Biff's lack of business success to Linda when he says, " Not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace"(Miller 51). Society so strongly asserts the necessity of making money and fulfilling the ' American Dream', that to anyone who is not able to obtain it, it is felt as a disgrace. Willy inflicts this harmful delusion on Biff rather than giving him room to grow as a person. This has to do with the fact that Willy was never able to reach what he would epitomize as ' successful'. The failures from his past and the struggles of his present that push Willy to be more demanding of his sons. Although he may view it as being a good father, others interpret it as harsh and unreasonable. In *Fences*, Troy feels the same pressures from society as it damages his relationship with Cory and Lyons. After Cory disobeys Troy by pursuing college football, Troy comments saying " I don't care what he's doing. When he get to the point where he wanna disobey

me... then it's time for him to move on"(Wilson 50). Troy is letting the disappointments of his sports career interfere with his son's dream of having one. Troy pressures Cory to put stability over his dreams. While many fathers are traditionally encouraging towards their son's aspirations, Troy exhibits a more condescending and judgemental attitude. Troy feels guilty that he wasn't able to provide more for his family, and he does not want Cory to fall down the same rabbit hole.

While it may have been towards the end of their lives, both Willy and Troy were able to make amends with the problems that once faced them and confront themselves about the deeper internal dilemmas it caused them. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy's relationship with Biff is forever altered when his son learns of Willy's affair. Willy and Biff both misinterpret their actions towards each other as hostility, when in reality they love and care for one another. After years of turmoil between Willy and Biff, they are finally able to make peace with one another. Willy's burden is lifted off of him once Willy discovers Biff loved him this whole time, " Isn't that- isn't that remarkable? Biff- he likes me!"(Miller 212). When Biff and Willy resolve their battle, Willy becomes so overcome with emotion. He realizes that although Biff was not able to match Willy's standards with absolute perfection, Biff was his son who loved him and cared for him and that was enough to make him happy. Willy didn't need his sons to be rich and powerful because being a good person is enough. This is what sets Willy apart as a tragic hero. His materialistic ideology and his clouded mind become opened with the realization that family is what is most important. While an antagonist may have been too stubborn to attain peace with one's enemies, Willy was able

to set that aside and grasp the complexity of the issues around him towards the end of the play. In *Fences*, Troy makes amends with those he had wronged in a different way. His confrontation wasn't to his family, but instead was between his inner demons. Troy taunts death saying, " I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna take and build me a fence around this yard. See? I'm gonna build me a fence around what belongs to me. And I want you to stay on the other side"(Wilson 77). As Troy's marriage and family appear to be crumbling before his eyes, he loses faith in himself and has to turn to another woman in order to have a sense of fulfillment. When Troy opens up to Rose on what pushed him to have an affair, he is confronting himself more than Rose. When accepting his flaws, he is able to regain his confidence and his sense of self. When he has his affair, he rejects his family and by having these confrontations he reclaims them as his own. Now a changed man, Troy is at peace with the burdens he had once exerted on himself. A tragic hero is able to maintain their heroic status because they face their problems head-on rather than rejecting all means confrontation.

One could argue that tragic heroes are more interesting on a deeper scale. While readers may be more drawn to the ideal protagonist, a tragic hero demonstrates the true complexity of human life and emotion. What makes a tragic hero more appealing to the advanced reader is the idea that they are more realistic. Readers can relate to a character who faces a harsh reality containing many troubles way more than one who lives in a perfect utopia. While Willy and Troy do things that aggravate readers, they are still characters who people can connect with. While they may not stand out as likable, when diving deeper into the play, readers come to understand the

motives that make them Willy and Troy who they are. When relating to tragic heroes, one must look under the surface to truly discover and empathize with these character's faults.