

Willie Loman vs.  
Oedipus: as tragic  
hero essay



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Art imitates life and is a mirror of our inherent complexities of our nature we uphold. It should be very true to our life. These are the words of Aristotle, a great Greek philosopher, who made tragedy a genre, something to implore upon. He said tragic plays should depict something very terrible, pity and deplorable catching the audience and make them plunge into the catharsis of emotions. Only a dislocated hero with a power to envisage his own downfall is a true Aristotelian tragic hero.

Both "Oedipus the King" by Sophocles written in 429 BC and "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller written in 1949 is an enigma of tragedy. "Oedipus the King" is a tragedy foretold and "Death of a Salesman" is a tragedy because of subsequent actions of protagonist. Both the writers spanned the genre of tragic plays by bringing in the characters' dilemma in darker shades in their relationship with their contemporary societies. The following paper is this comparison between Willie Loman as an ordinary salesman of 1949 and Oedipus, the king of the centuries past but both have one thing in common; they are both deemed as great tragic heroes. Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King' was noble and possessed with virtuous qualities, whereas Willie Loman of "Death of a Salesman" was an ordinary man of materialistic world of 1949 yet both owed their tragic death to the inherent flaw in their character.

In the words of Aristotle, they had hamartia-the most crucial element in the hero's nature that would ultimately lead to his downfall. While comparing Willie Loman and Oedipus, it becomes quite clear that both of them tried to overcome their obstacles to avoid any possibility of failure. On one hand was Willie Loman, who was very hard working and cherished his dreams to make

riches in American world whereas on the other hand was King Oedipus who was noble and wanted to get rid of town from plague. He was proud, boastful and wanted to maintain his position and protect his people. Both the characters imbibed in their nature willingness to bring about happiness in their simple lives.

With similar motivational level and corporeal struggle, they strove to achieve wealth and satisfaction respectively in their lives but both failed. The efforts they made to rise in their struggles and the way their decent begins vary in certain degree. And it is quite true that only one with more 'Letter and Spirit' would clear the concept of Aristotle's version of tragic hero. Willie Loman's pursuit of the American dream as a salesman and quest for happiness only became an archetypal of the tragic consequences. The fact was that it was 1949, the period of change and so was the change of the selling methods but Willie Loman did not change.

Willie was not able to adjust himself to change when competition was on the rise. He was what others said, "the quintessential American dreamer." (Romanyshyn 227) King Oedipus's tragedy was predestined. It was his fate that had to happen and it was more of lack of knowledge that would bring about his downfall.

Willie Loman ingested into the world of shabby values was bewildered, disillusioned and unsuccessful. He said, "Suddenly I realize I'm going sixty miles an hour, and I don't remember the last five minutes." (Miller & Bigsby 3) At the age of sixty-three, he thought that he was the most popular,

respected and good-looking but it was just his illusion. In Oedipus's tragedy, fate has the most important role to play.

His tragedy was already predestined. He made number of efforts to avoid to kill his father and sleep with his mother yet unavoidable circumstances coaxed him to kill his father and marry the woman, in Thebes, in whose womb he was born. He lived with this relationship for many years until that ill-fated day arrived and he came to know the reality. His wife killed herself and Oedipus blinded himself with the pins of the brooch taken out from her dress. The tragedy of Willie could be partly attributed to fate but more as a consequence of his own actions.

Willie was married to Linda Loman who was the most deep-seated and caring woman. She had two sons, Biff and Happy. The play started when Biff and Happy were in their late teens and the sales career of Willie was going under heavy loss. At this juncture of life, he felt he never had that relationship with his family as he had relationship before and time and again, the realization that he was unable to give that financial support to his family, which he was supposed to give, would daunt him.

Willie spent his life in illusions of the past because he was afraid of facing the reality of his poor financial condition and the condition into which his family was leading. Due to his philandering and lackluster approach, Willie lost his job. Over and above, his house had also been mortgaged for past many years and finally when he died, his car the only possession and symbol of his pride too got destroyed. In this sense, Willie followed Aristotle's conception of a tragic hero, "...a change of fortune... from prosperity to misfortune...."

(Aristotle 13). He died so that his family could receive insurance check and Biff gets financial independence, but he failed.

Willie had some reasonable purpose but unfortunately for him, his plan did not work and in his funeral no one turned up except his family and friend Charlie. The play had a deep impact on the audiences, as the tragedy of Willie was not only his tragedy but also the tragedy of every ordinary man. Unlike Oedipus, he was the character everyone could relate himself to and enter into the cord of deep virtues of society. Arthur Miller used to write the plays where he expected his audience to pass the moral judgment on his main protagonists. His plot construction, character development and the final theme of the play invite or persist that any individual assessment of guilt ought to be measured against a more abstract and general moral standard. And according to this, there should prevail a general moral authority against which spectators' general moral agreement can be measured.

But Willie Loman failed to arguably come up with any moral agreement and what emerged were only the false values. Brooks Atkinson wrote in his initial review of the play on February 11, 1949, "The illusions by which he (Willie Loman) has lived -opportunities missed, wrong formulas for success, fatal misconceptions about his place in the scheme of things.... The phantom of it all has caught up with him..... Suddenly there is nothing".

(Collins 120) Fifteen years later, Harold Clurman echoed, "Willy's hollow 'religion' has crippled his faculties, corroded his moral fibre. The action of the play supports his moral failings." (Collins 120) This shows Willie Loman's

tragedy did not come anywhere near the Aristotelean tragedy. Willie wanted to see all the values of hard work, intelligence, aptitude, and honesty in his children but could not see within himself and his surroundings. Only the credo "well liked" was the value system Willie so cherished and wanted to pass on to his two boys Biff and Happy and valued the advice of Ben when he said, "Ben Am I right? Don't you think I am right? I value your advice.

" (Miller & Bigsby 65) As said by Robert A Segal, Oedipus fell from regal king to cursed exile. Aristotle's tragedy also implied that hero too can become the cause and not just the victim of his downfall, and here Oedipus by trying to inquire into the truth, made the way for his own downfall. If he had not discovered the truth, he would have lived for a longer time. (Segal 131) The pride too had overpowered Oedipus and belittled an elderly and a blind man, when he said, "You sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man!" (Scene I, 163: Arp & Johnson 1221) "Damnation Take You! Out of this place! Out of my sight!" (Scene I, 419-420: Arp & Johnson 1230) It was also pride in him that made him believe he was more than God and he could outmaneuver him by modifying his fate: "Since I must flee from Thebes, yet never again / See my own country men, my own country men / For fear of joining my mother in marriage / And killing Polybos, my father." (Scene II, 781-784: Arp & Johnson 1241) Oedipus king proved to be more apt replica of the Aristotle's tragic hero than of Willie.

He was bravest of all in their region, morally strong, and a great ruler but his pride and the debilitating desire to know the truth made him the most tragic character. Though Willie was also morally strong yet every time a certain essence of moral vacuum is felt through out in his actions and his dealings

with the contemporary world outside. He loved his family and died for the cause of his family but he was an ordinary man and this made him less tragic in a certain degree than Oedipus's tragedy.