

Shakespeare's, hamle t, and arthur miller's, death of a salesman, on the issue of t...

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A comparison essay between Shakespearean, Hamlet, and Arthur Miller's, Death of a Salesman, on the issue of tragedy. BY Trill 3 The term, tragedy, by dictionary definition, can be defined as " A story with a sad or unhappy ending. " (Arthur Miller, Tragedy and the Common Man). Although there is some truth to this, the true definition of tragedy goes much deeper. The notion of tragedy has been a part of English literature since the beginning of the Classical times. Tragedy is available in almost all literary forms, such as, novels, play wrights, film, etc.

Shakespeare, for example, has written numerous world renowned tragedies since the turn of the seventeenth century. Four centuries later, with all the changes to the world of literature, tragedy continues to prevail, as a popular form of literature. Through comparing and contrasting William Shakespearean, Hamlet. With Arthur Miller's, Death of a Salesman, it is clear that tragedy continues to have many of the same features as it did so long ago and it continues to appeal to audiences today. This is demonstrated through the tragic hero, the hero's tragic flaw, and the catharsis.

With these three elements included, a more exact definition of tragedy is defined by Aristotle as, '... He imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play... Through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. " (Aristotle, The Poetics). Although each and every tragedy is slightly different or even quite dissimilar, every true tragedy includes the presence of a tragic hero.

The tragic hero can be defined as “ man as both beautiful and terrible” (Class notes, Tragedy and The Tragic Hero). It is most often the hero's unjustified life which turns his story into a tragedy. The tragic hero has been a critical role since the beginning of tragedies and it continues to be today. However, views of how the hero should rank in society, have changed over time. According to Aristotle, it is thought that the hero's position in society is to be much above the average man. Aristotle defines the hero to be “ a character of noble stature and has greatness. (Aristotle, Aristotle Idea of Tragedy). This can be seen in Shakespearean time, through such plays as, Hamlet. Hamlet's noble stature comes from his position as a prince; he is the son of the late king and nephew to the new king. Hamlet's strong loyalty and dedication to his family has been interpreted as his greatness by many critics. This can be seen as Hamlet learns the truth about his father's death, and his father asks him to seek revenge on his uncle, the new king, “ Haste me to Knott, that I, with wings as swift As meditation or the thoughts of love, May sweep to my revenge. (Shakespeare, Hamlet, III, v, 23-24). Hamlet reveals that he will do whatever it takes to seek revenge upon his uncle and is not worried about the consequences. With this quote, it becomes obvious that Hamlet is in fact the tragic hero of the play. Although it is partly the consistency of been viewed differently by great philosophers today, than it was hundreds of years ago. Arthur Miller, for example, believes “ that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. ” (Arthur Miller, Tragedy and the Common Man).

The tragic hero, Willy Loman, in Arthur Miller's, *Death of a Salesman* , unquestionably conforms to this description. Willy Loman is a common man,
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which is evident through his family life, his career as a salesman, and his position in society. Viewers can easily identify with him, which further classifies him as a tragic hero. Although Willy is a common man, he still has some greatness. " His greatness lies in his struggle to claim some shred of dignity. He fights back against a system that is bigger than he is, that destroys ' little men' like him. He demonstrates an ability for self sacrifice. (Class notes, Death of a Salesman- Is it a Tragedy). This is demonstrated through Will's discussion with Howard about getting further ahead in his business, " You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit. " (Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, p. 4). Willy is attempting to justify his position in society and fight back against the system, which he inevitably fails miserably at doing. By comparing Shakespearean Hamlet with Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's, Death of a Salesman, it is evident that the tragic hero is a key element to every tragedy.

Although their positions in society are slightly different they both possess qualities of greatness and will eventually be doomed by these qualities. A tragedy would not be a true tragedy without the presence of the tragic hero, which is why audiences are still attracted to tragedies after hundreds of years. Although the tragic hero is acclaimed to be deemed with the qualities of greatness, the tragic hero is certainly not perfect. In fact, this strong imperfection is known as the hero's tragic flaw. The hero's tragic flaw is what distinguishes him from any other character.

This can be seen in both *Death of a Salesman* and *Hamlet*. It may be exactly this unique tragic flaw which continually attracts audiences to tragedies today. The hero's tragic flaw is unique to each character and it is what makes him/her a true tragic hero. In Shakespearean, *Hamlet*, Hamlet's tragic flaw comes from his boundless loyalty to his family. It is because he strives to follow his father's orders to the absolute fullest that he eventually causes his own demise. Hamlet is overly passionate, indecisive, excessively intellectual, and overly infantile. He has never grown up.

Hamlet suffers from Oedipus complex and cannot accept the reality that he has a mother with sexual needs. It is his tragic flaw which make Hamlet bound for destruction. This becomes evident to the audience when Hamlet is in his mother's room and hears a scream, without looking he assumes it is the voice of Claudia, " How now, a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead. [Makes a pass through the arras, Polonium falls and dies]. " (*Hamlet*, III, ' v, 72) This is Hamlet's character flaw, he doesn't think before he acts, he simply wants to follow his father's commands to the fullest and so he acts with excessive passion. Inevitably succumbs to his/her weaknesses/tragic flaw. (Class notes, *Tragedy and the Tragic Hero*). The tragic hero, Hamlet, is very different from *Death of a Salesman's* tragic hero, Willy Loman, yet the tradition of the tragic flaw continues. Willy Loman's tragic flaw differs dramatically from Hamlet, yet audiences are still attracted to the tragic flaw today as much as they were in Shakespearean time. In Arthur Miller's, *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's tragic flaw comes from the unnecessary, immense importance he puts upon success, class, and respect through the eyes of society.

Wily becomes obsessed with obtaining a high position in society that it becomes his only reason for living. It is his tragic flaw which eventually leads him to his own death. As Arthur Miller comments, " the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life if need be, to secure one thing- his sense of personal dignity. " (Arthur Miller, Tragedy and The Common Man). This describes Wily Loan exactly. The feeling of pity is evoked in viewers because Will's tragic flaw is so easy to identify with.

Will's flaw has good intentions, for he wants Biff to follow in his footsteps and benefit from his values, but Will's true flaw is his blindness to see that his obsession with these values is causing his own demise. This is demonstrated when Wily gives his two sons advice about getting ahead in the world "... The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates a personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. (Miller, Death of a Salesman, Peg 33) Obtaining a high position in society and being respected in the business world are what Wily feels are the most important aspects of life.

As Bradley writes, "[The tragic hero] need not be good, but should have so much of greatness that in his error and fall we are vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature. " (Class notes, Tragedy and The Tragic Hero). The feeling evoked is that if waste. Both Hamlet and Wily had great possibilities in life but the blindness of their tragic fall caused them to waste their chances and waste their life. This expected tragic ailing has remained

constant over time and is what continues to appeal to audiences time and time again.

Tragedies are literary works which are continually filled with suffering, destruction, and most often death. However, through this suffering, the tragic concept is that " man endures and gains through suffering. " (Class notes, Tragedy and the Tragic Hero) The destruction in each tragedy is never meaningless, it has significant relevance. Although, emotions are aroused, tragedy does not leave viewers feeling depressed. The goal of a tragedy is to leave viewers in a state of catharsis. " The word catharsis implies that tragedy purges, removes, or unclogs negative emotions, such as pity and fear that build up within the human spirit. (Some thoughts About Tragedy, both literary and mundane) Tragedy cleanses, purifies, and thus rids viewers of negative emotions, such as, anger, pity, and fear, and turns them into something good. Viewers endure the tragedy but then gain through suffering by purifying their unhealthy emotions into something healthy. Catharsis is evident in today, as it did hundreds of years ago. At the end of Hamlet, viewers are left with a very negative scene of blood, and many meaningless deaths. As depressing as it may seem, it is not meant to leave the audience feeling depressed.

The audience is left with a feeling of cleansing, ridding any feelings of revenge. Viewers accept a feeling of a new beginning, due to the prior line of madness being destructed. Hamlet displays a portion of this optimism Just before his death, " Give me the cup. Let go. By heaven, I'll have't. O God, Horatio, what a wounded name, Things standing thus unknown, shall live

behind me! If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, Absent thee from felicity awhile, And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain To tell my story
(Hamlet, v, ii, 120).

Although Hamlet is dying, he asks for his story to be told so other's can benefit from the story of his life. It turns a depressing notion into something optimistic. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* follows this same trait. Without personally reading or viewing, *Death of a Salesman*, one might think that Willy Loman taking his own life is a very depressing notion. However, like Hamlet, *Death of a Salesman* leaves the audience with the feeling of a catharsis when Will's life tragically ends. Audiences can easily relate to Willy Loman in his time of despair, as he fails again and again to obtain recognition from society.

It is his entire reason for living until he eventually gives up and lays down his life in order for Biff to benefit. The tragedy allows the audience to purge themselves of feelings of pity and fear due to the strong connection with Will's character. Happy realizes what Willy has done for Biff and as he stands at his father's funeral, Happy defends Willy by saying " I'm goanna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm goanna win it for him. Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Peg. 138-139). The audience realizes that Willy has almost turned his own defeat into a triumph, which replaces any negative emotions, with positive ones. There is no doubt that in every tragedy, there is endless suffering and destruction, however it is ones recognition with these feelings

which allows the audience to cleanse themselves of these emotions and gain through the suffering. These qualities have been a large component of tragedy since tragedy began and continue to attract and appeal to audiences today. Tragedies are often extremely varied and each one is slightly different.

The content of tragedies can be extremely diverse and often have nothing in common with any other tragedy. However, there are a few components which must be present in every true tragedy. Three important aspects which are contained in every true tragedy is the tragic hero, the hero's tragic flaw, and the catharsis. This becomes evident through comparing and contrasting William Shakespearean, Hamlet, with Arthur Miller's, Death of a Salesman. It is these features which allow tragedy to appeal to audiences today, just centuries and they will continue to be popular for centuries to come.