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Death of a Salesman

It is a modern play by Arthur Miller that revolves around the life of an old salesman living in America during the 1940s. Willy Loman is the protagonist of the play who is moving towards his death. It is asked whether Willy is a tragic character. A tragic character, according to Aristotle, is the one who misjudges a critical phenomenon that leads to his destruction. Willy Loman makes more than one judgmental error, but that is not enough to consider him a Tragic character. A tragic hero must be a noble-born and even he should meet his ill fate due to the act of God/gods, according to the traditional definition of a tragic hero. Thus, Oedipus Rex and Hamlet are considered the best examples of tragedy. Here, Miller rebels against Greek and the Classical Theatre. His hero is a Common Man who lives in a small house with a middle-class family and has an ordinary salesman job. Miller’s rebellion against the traditional theater enables him to portray the agonies of the common people of the society. Miller’s character can be called a pathetic character as we notice the pitiable state of William Loman (Willy), but it cannot be considered a tragic character according to the definition.

**Character Analysis of Willy Loman**

Willy's character is full of juxtapositions. He has high ideals of becoming successful, but his old age is burdened with the fact that he is not a successful man. The most pitiable factor is that he does not acknowledge his failures. He has a wife Linda and two sons Happy and Biff. Linda is a loyal wife and Happy is a working man. Biff is a catalyst in the play as he has many effects on the mind of Willy rather the both have a reciprocal relationship in this sense. Willy is 63, and now he has difficulty in driving which is crucial for his job. He makes many driving mistakes like stopping at the green signals and keep driving at the red ones etc. It causes some minor accidents and his family is unsure if he would come back alive from the job or not. He has become soliloquy, and the other perhaps his biggest flaw is that he takes refuge in his past that is more than often. He recalls his past anywhere anytime and stays absent from his present. The whole play is in
Present but Willy’s mind is in the past that even irritates his family, friends, and boss. *Stream of Consciousness* is a feature of modern literature, but Willy's case is an exception to even this phenomenon. He is always busy with his hallucinations. The play is the story of one last day of his life, but we learn a lot about his past thanks to his hallucinations. Willy always wished to have his sons successful that is also not happened. Following is the detail about his past that the audience learns through his hallucinations. It is important to take an overview of his whole life to understand his psyche in a better way.

**Willy’s Childhood**

Willy was an abandoned child because his father left his brother Ben and his mother along with him when he was 3. He has no memories of his father except those told by Ben. Ben also left the home to find his father when he was 17, but instead of traveling to the North towards Alaska he went to South and reached Africa where he made fortune while working in diamond mines. He was a rich person when he entered his twenties. Ben is the only ideal of Willy. Willy's mother died and he was obliged to do the job of a salesman when he reached youthhood.

**Willy’s Youthhood**

Willy is stubborn and ironically proud as a young man. He marries Linda and they settle in Brooklyn. He has a helping friend and neighbor Charley. He mocks at Charley and his son Bernard who both are industrious and successful. Charley considers the ill economic state of Willy and offers him a job which Willy declines saying: “I don’t want your god-damned job!; I don’t care how big you are,” (Miller). He feels disrespect to accept a job, but he accepts 50 dollars that Charley lends him weekly. He is lucky because his insulting behavior does not offend Charley. Perhaps that is the reason that Willy does not fix his faults.

**Willy as a father: A Poor Role Model**

Willy is shown as a man who raises his children with improper education. Happy is portrayed as a womanizer independent man. The relationship between Biff and Willy is more visible in the play because Biff always takes his father as his role model and always tries to act as his father likes. When Biff steals a football for the first time, Willy appreciates this as a good initiative and says: “Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative!” (Miller). This appreciation makes Biff habitual of stealing. Biff is always contented with his ill acts because his father never condemns any ill act. Another example of Willy being a poor role model is noticed in Act-I when he says to teenage Biff: “Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that's all. Don't make any promises. No promises of any kind. Because a girl, y'know, they always believe what you tell 'em” (Miller). This corrupts him ethically and he cheats women proudly. Biff is condemned by Linda as being “too rough with the girls” (Miller). Willy himself has an extra-marital affair albeit Linda is his loyal wife. Biff’s ideal also falls to the ground when he catches him with an unknown lady during a trip to Boston. He calls his father a "*phony little fake*," and he feels ashamed of following such a man.

**Willy’s Economic State**

This is the only aspect of Willy's life where the audience might have some feeling of sympathy with him. He has been working for years for Howards, but he is fired by the son of his boss Howard the senior. His job has also hindered him to fulfill his American Dream: “that each individual has the right and freedom to seek prosperity and happiness” (CFI). This could be a passive criticism of Capitalism by Miller. Ben has died, but Willy still talks to him through creating hallucinations. He asks him how he made a fortune. He idealizes Ben, and perhaps Ben is the only person whom Willy does not envy. Willy always desires to have successful sons, but they both are not perhaps because of the ill training. Nevertheless, such a poor financial state of his family frustrates Willy and he feels his life as trash.

**Conclusion**

Willy’s biography rather autobiography reveals that Willy has no similarity with the traditional tragic characters of the theatre although the reader feels some sympathy for how Willy’s life ends. This is the one characteristic of tragedy, but the other factors of a tragic character should not be ignored that is violated by Miller. Willy is neither a noble-born nor a God cursed. All the painful circumstances of his life are the consequences of his stupidities. Miller has indicated that **there are countless persons like Willy in our so-called civilized society**. They are groaning under the stress of financial setbacks. Usually, their miserable financial state becomes the cause of their moral corruption. They are in a large number, but the policymakers ignore them or undermine them. Not only the policymakers, but the writers also consider them *too common* to be made the subject of their writings although they are the basic bricks of our National Palace of civilization. This feature of Miller’s work makes him a true modern playwright who has given a new direction to literature in America.

**Works Cited**

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