

TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN IN THE
LIGHT OF OEDIPUS THE KING

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Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman may be considered one of the most effective pieces of dramatic art in the Twentieth Century. It is a tragedy in the classical concept of the term, and it contains several elements in common with Sophocles' Oedipus the King, the best known of classical Greek tragedies. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss such tragic elements, although concentrating more on Miller's play. I would say Death of a Salesman is a classical modern tragedy, since it deals with modern subject-matters and speaks to a modern audience. Willy Loman, the protagonist of this tragedy, is a lower-middle class, ordinary man who does not sit on a throne but in a car with which he earns his living. In spite of this big difference with the protagonist of Sophocles' play, both Willy and Oedipus can be considered equally successful tragic heroes. Both of them are human beings whose ideals of achieving human perfection have been frustrated, due to their incapacity to face their weaknesses, cope with their limitations, and confront their real selves.

In both plays, the protagonists are guilt-ridden, and their tormented consciences claim for an expiation of their "sins," and this is what holds the action. The effectiveness of these two characters is that, although the audience is

aware of their faults, it sympathizes with them and is even tempted to consider them innocent or merely unaware victims of external forces. Oedipus, a victim of his fate, might not be judged guilty because he does not know that the man he killed on the road is Laius, his father, and that the woman he married is his own mother. Willy Loman, a victim of society, might not be guilty because he is trapped by an unjust system that does not consider a man's devotion to his job, and by his two sons who turn their backs to a father who deposited all his aspirations on them. Nevertheless, both Oedipus and Willy Loman are guilty. Although to a lesser extent in Miller's play, the heroes' actions are the result of their free will and both of them are trapped by their own ambushes. The inevitability of trying to escape their real selves, and their inability to overcome a confrontation with the truth is what makes these two characters tragic heroes.

Another tragic element common to these plays is their structure. Both of them start with the consequences of a past action whose revelation constitutes the climax of both stories and leads to the catastrophe at the end. In the beginning of Oedipus the King, the plague is already all over the city of Thebes, as a consequence of Oedipus' crimes. Death of a Salesman starts when Willy Loman is near the "breaking point" due to an excess of work, preoccupation, and repressed guilt. Neither his wife, Linda, nor his sons, Biff and Happy, can do anything to prevent it, and the Loman family is in a terrible condition as a consequence of Willy's faults. In

both plays the audience becomes aware that some fatality will occur, but the tragic flaws or "hamartias," which are the reasons for the present chaos, are only gradually revealed and explained. As in a detective story, the narrative of Sophocles' play is inserted in the dialogues and speeches, and Willy's subconsciousness gradually unfolds the whole story as some present word or event reminds him of the past. Such technique of gradual revelation of the truth is an effective characteristic of tragedies, since it provokes strong emotions, creates tension, and builds suspense.

The action of both plays consists of a pursuit of the truth, flight from the confrontation with this truth, and the conflicts or "agons" deriving from the heroes' indecision, pride, and fear. At the same time that Oedipus wants to know Laius' assassin, he evades the answer. He oscillates between listening to Tiresias and ignoring him, and he does not know whether to believe in Jocasta or not, whether to blame Creon or not, because he is afraid to face the truth about himself. Although aware of what the oracle has predicted for him, Oedipus prefers to ignore the facts about his origin after he commits the murder on the road, as he also ignores the murder itself. It is more convenient for him to rely on the fact that he is the only man who could solve the riddle of the sphinx; that he is superior to all men and even has supernatural powers because he believes he has escaped the gods' determinations. Willy Loman wants to find an explanation for the questions he has in his mind, but at the same time he tries to avoid it, hiding behind his illusions. He should know that the episode in Boston may be the cause

of Biff's failure, but he refuses to admit it. He prefers to ignore this fact and look for some other justification. He simply cannot see himself and the ones around him as they really are. Both Oedipus and Willy Loman are involved in terrible conflicts with others, as well as with themselves.

Such conflicts constitute the essential element of a tragedy because of the violent emotions they stir in the audience. In Sophocles' tragedy, there are "agons" between Oedipus and the will of the gods, when he tries to escape his fate. Later, Oedipus has conflicts with Tiresias, Creon, Jocasta, and also with himself. According to some psychological theories, Oedipus's true guilt is to have unconsciously wanted to beget himself through his mother and from her -- a double conflict of an individual who wants to be neither father nor son but himself only. Oedipus was born as a result of his father's drunkenness one night, an indication that he was not actually desired; he was rejected by his parents when he was still a baby; so now he places his ego above anything and any one else. Oedipus is tortured by his "agons" throughout the whole play, and his flight ends only when he finally calls the shepherd who had saved his life, instead of disappearing with him, when he was a baby.

The "agons" in Death of a Salesman involve Willy Loman and the people around him -- his family, employer, and friends. But, like Oedipus, Willy's greatest conflict is with himself, with his own conscience. Miller's hero is a man who has built his life on the illusion that he is respected, well-liked, and thus destined to be successful. He has raised his sons by conditioning them to follow his

dogma and believe that they are the best in everything, and that they will never fail. But his eagerness for success and power, his selfishness and excessive pride, have led him to annihilate his wife's and his sons' personalities. He is actually an immature and insecure man who contradicts himself all the time, and whose inconsistent values and false ideals have confused his sons in such a way that they are totally unable to get settled in life. Happy is the personification of mediocrity whose self-assertion consists of the vulgar idea that having his own apartment and sleeping with every woman he meets are all a man needs to be "happy". He actually deludes himself with the false ideals he has inherited from his father. His apparent good humor and happiness are merely a way to avoid admitting that he has always been rejected by his father, who worships Biff.

Why this obsession Willy has for his oldest son? It is not merely a question of preference, but mainly because Biff, who had been the projection of Willy's false image of himself, turned out to be the exact representation of his real image -- a failed, "low man". As a teenager Biff used to be a leader, a high school hero, popular, admired, and well-liked. He had the potentialities of becoming a success in the future, and his motivation was his father's incentive and "example", or the image Willy "sold" of himself. Biff idolized this image, but exactly at the moment he mostly needed his father's moral support, he was confronted with the real Willy. He saw that what his father said did not correspond at all with what he did. Biff's disappointment caused a trauma that prevented him from doing anything

worthwhile thereafter, as if his life had stopped in Boston. But not even the audience becomes aware of Willy's greatest tragic "flaw" until the climax, towards the end of the play.

Linda suspects there must be a reason for the gap between Willy and Biff because, whenever there is a letter from Biff or he comes home, Willy gets worse, but she does not even get close to the truth. She never realizes that it is Willy's repressed guilt that forbids her to mend stockings in the house because it reminds him of what he wants to forget. Only Biff can understand what is destroying Willy, because it is the same thing that is destroying himself. Sometimes he can hardly control himself, as when he cries out to his mother once, "I know he's a fake and he doesn't like anyone around who knows."¹ But Linda tries to justify Willy all the time. In fact, she contributes to her husband's and her sons' failures with her passivity, omission, and weak personality that lead her to perpetuate Willy's illusions and false ideals before himself and their sons. The only time Linda tried to influence Willy's decisions was disastrous — when she convinced him that he should not follow his brother Ben to Alaska. At the end, Linda cannot understand her husband's suicide (although she had somehow predicted it), because she has never gotten to know the real Willy. She has the same false image of him that he had of himself, as she also holds the same false values that Willy cultivated. She has never realized that Willy's failure as a father, and his need to expiate before Biff, were more crucial to him than his failure as a salesman, the supporter of the family.

Willy Loman is forced to admit his failure as a salesman much before he is confronted with his failure as a father, and his resistance against the former is not as great as that against the latter. Moral and personal defeat are far more difficult to cope with than professional and economical defeat. It has been claimed that Death of a Salesman is a social criticism and that Willy Loman is a victim of the American society of the time; that he represents the distorted dreams of the American myth which failed because of excessive individualism, pride, and ambition — an over-competitive system. It is true that there were faults with the system, and that some of Willy's complaints were just. He was right to claim for some guarantee when it was time for him to retire, as he was also right when he complained about the exploitation of employees by employer, and about the discrepancies of a consumer's society. But Willy Loman is not merely a victim of his environment; he is a consenting victim, and the driving forces were his pride, his uncontrollable ambition, his false ideals. In spite of the system, he could have succeeded. The "ghost" of his brother Ben is there to remind him that he had other chances in life which he deliberately threw away. Willy simply could not distinguish between the real and the ideal, and this conflict may be considered the tragic force on the play.

Such conflict makes Willy postpone the confrontation with his real self throughout the whole play. At the beginning, in the stage directions, Miller says that the atmosphere of the setting is one of "dream rising out of reality." The expressionistic scenes, showing the inside of Willy's

mind from his own point-of-view, display a co-occurrence of past and present, dream and reality, which have a powerful dramatic effect. As Willy's subconsciousness is gradually revealed, the audience accompanies this man's struggle against admitting his own faults and guilt. There is enough evidence that Willy might have been happier in a rural environment, working with his hands, thus following his father and his brother. But there is much more evidence that if Willy had been more responsible and realistic, conscious of his limitations and weaknesses, he would not have failed. Willy's true guilt is that he had a false image of himself and of others. Because he thought he was better than anyone else, he humiliated his best friend, Charley, and Biff's best friend, Bernard. Not even after he realized that he had been defeated as a salesman, did Willy accept Charley's help. He would accept Charley's money, but he would never work for the man he had mocked all his life.

Willy's refusal of Charley's proposal of job gives evidence to the fact that Willy gave more importance to his image as a father than his image as a salesman before his sons. The death of the salesman precedes the death of the father and the latter involves a much greater conflict. Willy saw how Bernard succeeded, in spite of his insignificance as a teenager in high school, just the opposite of Biff. He also saw that Charley succeeded, mainly as a father, in spite of his lack of ambition and non-interference in his son's life, just the opposite of Willy's concept of education. And he finally understood that it was his betrayal of the image Biff had of him as a father that caused the son's failure.

When Willy met his sons in the restaurant, he realized that he could not escape anymore. Only then did the Boston episode come back to his mind, and he realized how much harm it had done to Biff. Only then did he understand that he had always been an obstacle, rather than a guidance, to his sons. When he was left by himself in the restaurant, he understood that his sons would be free only after he got out of their way, so he decided to kill himself. But his attempt to expiate his faults is also confusing and ambiguous. At the same time that he recognizes his guilt and failure, he debates with his conscience (symbolized by Ben) as to whether he should carry out his plan or not.

Willy's eagerness to protect his ideal image as a father is greater than his desire to admit the naked truth. He has been forced to confront his mistakes, but he cannot cope with his real image. For this reason, he argues with Biff, who tries to force him to face reality and to prevent him from making another mistake. He does kill himself, but his last words are full of the same pride and ambition that destroyed him. He dies in the illusion that Biff will worship him for the insurance money which will make Biff "magnificent... ahead of Bernard again!"² Willy's suicide is actually a desperate attempt to perpetuate his dreams, and the only one who understands this is Biff, who concludes, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong... He never knew who he was."³ To a certain extent, Biff Loman can also be considered a tragic hero, because he will have to keep his suffering to himself and cope with it for the rest of his life. Unlike Willy had predicted, Biff neither worships nor

blames Willy for his self-punishment; he simply understands this man's weaknesses and pities him. This feeling is shared by the audience, and catharsis comes in this tragedy with the recognition that the Loman family is finally free to face the reality of their lives.

The end of Sophocles' play also involves much suffering, but Oedipus is much more coherent than Willy Loman. He had promised to punish Laius' assassin, and he does not hesitate when he finds out that he is the one to be punished. Oedipus admits and accepts the truth, in spite of the pain it gives him, and in this sense he is braver than Willy. Oedipus blinds himself and condemns himself to a life of exile, and his suffering is greater than Willy's, because he will remain alive. But, like Willy, Oedipus also abandons his children, recognizing that they would feel free in his company. Both Oedipus and Willy Loman punish themselves after being confronted with their tragic flaws, so that the order may be re-established in their environment. Both Oedipus and Willy Loman are, in fact, two human beings who could not escape the limitations imposed by their human condition.

NOTES

¹ Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, in Collected Plays
(New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p. 64.

² Miller, p. 219.

³ Miller, p. 221.

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