

**TRAGIC HEROES IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND MILLER'S
*DEATH OF A SALESMAN***

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Abstract

Shakespeare tragedy focuses on the major **character, its flaw which causes the story to end with his tragic downfall**. Shakespearean tragic hero is the only and the one in the play belonging to royal or noble class; however, there is at least one character near him which is also highlighted. In his tragedies, male characters have a dominant role and female characters, although unforgettable, usually play little action. On the other hand Miller's tragedy is the tragedy of common man. He argues that tragedy is a genre that is just applicable to normal characters or common man.

In Hamlet tragedy is the result of the main character's unrealistic ideals and his inability to overcome his weakness of indecisiveness. In Death of a Salesman tragedy is the result of man struggling to hold dignity he has left in a changing society that no longer values in which he believes.

The paper will focus on the concept of the tragic heroes by Shakespeare and Miller and their similar and different views. Further the paper will elaborate the ideas and perception of the tragic heroes, struggle in isolation which leads to their downfall, and the changes brought out in the character meeting their ultimate destiny.

Key Words: Tragic hero, tragedy, indecisiveness, struggle, isolation, downfall.

Aristotle in his Poetics deals with the ideal tragic hero which has attracted a great deal of critical attention. Aristotle says:

It follows plainly, in the first place that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity; for it moves the audience to neither fear nor pity: it simply shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity, for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy.

Nor, again should the downfall of an utter villain be exhibited.

A plot of this kind would, doubtless "satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of man like ourselves."

Shakespeare tragedy focuses on the major **character, its flaw which causes the story to end with his tragic downfall**. Shakespearean tragic hero is the only and the one in the play belonging to royal or noble class; however, there is at least one character near him which is also highlighted. In his tragedies, male characters have a dominant role whereas female characters, although unforgettable, usually play little action. On the other hand Miller's tragedy is the tragedy of common man. He argues that tragedy is a genre that is just applicable to normal characters or common man too.

Shakespeare being a renaissance writer derives his tragedy less from medieval tragedy than from the Aristotelian notion of the tragic flaw, a moral weakness or human error that causes the protagonist's downfall. Hence the tragic hero is soul of a tragedy. The tragic hero should not offend the moral sensibilities of the audiences, and as a character he must be true to type, true to life. The change of fortune should be from good to bad rather than from bad to good. The tragic hero is of greater than average qualities, usually of surpassing physical attractiveness and personal qualities. However, he possesses a tragic flaw, which combines with circumstances finally leading to an error in judgment that leads inevitably to his downfall. He becomes possessed of hubris, arrogance, and is struck down by nemesis or the agents of nemesis.

Arthur Miller stimulates the minds by explaining that a tragic hero can and should include the common man. According to him a tragic hero is the one who attempts to gain his 'rightful' position in his society and in doing so, struggles for his 'dignity'. According to Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero, a tragic hero should belong to royal status and "arouses and pity" through his pitfalls. But Arthur Miller points out that considering the noble's hardships does not seem to excite the modern audience. Further Miller views that the tragic flaw lies in a sense of optimism, an adjective not usually given to tragedies. Arthur Miller feels that they should be considered optimistic in that a tragedy "reinforces".

The reason for Shakespeare choosing those people of "high degree" is that their private sufferings are closely connected with the fate of the nation and that "his fate effects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence ---- perhaps the caprice ---- of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival"(Bradley, 1965, p. 19).

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare describes the Danish prince Hamlet like this:

His greatness weighed, his will is not his own,

For he himself is subject to his birth.
He may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The safety and health of his whole state. (I. iii. 20-24)

As a prince, Hamlet is fully aware of his responsibility for his people and that his decision might have effects on the whole country, so when it is time to take actions, he always hesitates. For example, when the players come to the court, Hamlet conceives and arranges the plan of having a scene of murder played before the King and Queen. Hamlet's device proves a complete success. When only six lines have been spoken by the player on the stage, the King starts to his feet and rushes out of the hall. Hamlet is beyond himself with the joy of discovery. He declares that now he could "drink hot blood, / and do such bitter business as the day, / would quake to look on" (III . ii. 397-399).

In this mood, and on his way to his mother's chamber, he comes upon the King, who is kneeling, conscience-stricken and praying. The enemy is now delivered into his hands:

Hamlet: Now might I do it pat, now he is praying:

And now I'll do it: and so he goes to heaven:

And so am I revenged. That would be scanned. (III. iii. 76-78)

The reason Hamlet gives for his refusing to kill the King is that if he kills the villain now, he would send his soul to heaven; and he would fail to kill his soul as well as his body and thus his revenge wish would not be fulfilled. But according to some critics, what he really shrinks from is the responsibility of killing of a king and its political result, because at that time the sudden death of the King might cause panic to the people and danger to the state. So at this stage he is keener of thinking about his country instead of his own personal feelings. This is the real reason for his delay in action.

The most striking feature of Hamlet's character is melancholy, and there can be no Hamlet without melancholy. His melancholy is the result of his speculative and contemplative mind. He is a man of thought. It doesn't mean that he never takes actions. In fact, in order to revenge Hamlet does act. He keeps the secret of the Ghost; he arranges for the play; and he kills Polonius (taking for Claudius). The problem is that at some critical moments when a sudden demand for difficult and decisive action arises, he becomes a thinker. He would examine the nature of action by asking himself, "How as I am to do it? When? Where? What will be the consequence to the State? What is the good of doing it in such a world as this?" However, after such an examination, the possibility of action is denied. Thus, the murdering of Claudius is postponed due to his hesitation. Hamlet's delay in punishing Claudius not only **causes his own death**, but the deaths of everyone else in his life except for Horatio and Fortinbras. He wants proof of the part his uncle and his mother played in his father's death. His royal birth leads him to consider his responsibilities to his country. This is Hamlet's internal conflict throughout the play.

His tragic flaw is 'procrastination'. His continuous awareness and doubt delays him in performing the needed. A goblet of poison wine meant for Hamlet is drunk by his mother killing her. So distraught, Hamlet kills Claudius in a hasty, impulsive act, thus overcoming his own

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‘tragic flaw.’ With the death of his father avenged, Hamlet dies. Hamlet decided to stay with his difficulties in life rather than commit suicide and “fly to others” that he knew nothing about. If Hamlet could have controlled his fascination with revenge and death, his death and countless others could have been spared. As Horatio is left standing over him as he dies, Hamlet utters, “O, I die, Horatio His procrastination, his tragic flaw, leads him to his doom along with that of the other characters he targets. But Hamlet is not responsible for the events which complicate the plot. Fate, chance and supernatural also play a critical role in Hamlet.

Arthur Miller’s Willy Lowman in *Death of a Salesman* is a tragic hero despite Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero being of royal status and “arouses our pity” through his pitfalls. It didn’t seem that the common man could also be a tragic hero the only reason for it can be his misfortunes which would not be too extreme and should be expected.

Willy Loman, the main character in *Death of a Salesman* is a complex and fascinating tragic character. He is a man struggling to hold onto what dignity he has left in a changing society that no longer values his ideas in which he is grown up and very firmly believes in it. In case of Willy Loman if society is to be blamed for much of his misfortune, he too has an equal extent for his bad judgment, disloyalty and his foolish pride.

Willy Loman is a firm believer in the “American Dream:” the notion that any man can rise from humble beginnings to greatness. His particular slant on this idea is that a man succeeds by selling his charisma, that to be well liked is the most important asset a man can have. He gave his best for 30 years, but as he enters the reclining years of his life things took a different turn. His own people have stopped responding to him and are unable to sell the firm’s goods to support him. His ambition was one of greatness, to work hard and to be a member of the firm; and if he fails in that he would at least want to be well-liked and be able to sell until the day of his death. He also thinks that the company likes what he is doing. He once said, “I’m the New England man. I am vital in New England” (Miller pg. 32). Willy’s main flaw is his foolish pride, this is what makes him a [tragic hero](#). Yet there are many [facets](#) to his personality that contribute to the state he and the family are in during the play. His upbringing of the boys is one major issue. To a certain extent he failed in this duty. He raised them with the notion that if one is well-liked, he need not worry about qualifications, and he believed that if his boys were popular they would come out on top. Sadly, he doesn’t realize that the only way an ordinary person can get rich is through work (represented by Bernard) or through luck and good timing (Ben), and Willy missed the boat when it came to luck. The boys grew up to believe what his father has inculcated in them and Happy went on to follow in his [footsteps](#) as a salesman. Biff, after catching his father with the woman begins to question these values. He realizes that for him, at least, these values are not applicable, and he is not too concerned if he doesn’t come out on top. He just wants to be able to say he knows who he is. The aptly named Happy continues to believe in these ideals even after his father’s death and decides that the Loman name will succeed.

In 1949, shortly after the play’s premiere, Miller wrote a controversial essay about how *Death of a Salesman* was a true tragedy, only with common people rather than kings. Loman’s lack of

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self-awareness is not unlike King Lear's or any other tragic hero of Shakespeare. It could be thus said in Miller's words, "a sense of personal dignity".

As the play progresses, one begins to feel sorry for Willy and his predicament, but also angry and frustrated with the character for his foolish pride. It is this trait that prevents him from accepting a steady job with Charlie, something that could have saved his life. However, it is this false pride that has been sparking the family flame for years, the notion that the Loman name was well known and well-liked. The family lie even amongst themselves about their position as is revealed during the climax of the play.

Willy Loman's character is capable of making errors. Because of his false belief about his success Howard fired him. After he got fired Charlie offered him a job, but he refuses to accept, because he is too proud and jealous to work for Charlie. His actions were wrong because at no time was a successful salesman. He is not a powerful character. Willy lives in his fantasies where he is the man. Who goes out to another place and comes out rich, he is loved by everyone and admired by his family. In real life, he is lazy and does not live up to his own ideals. "As Aristotle explains, a tragic hero must be one of noble character and must fall from power and happiness." (www.ccd.rightchoice.org/lit115/poetics.html) but Willy neither has a noble characteristic nor does he fall from power because he does not have a position of power. According to Miller, a tragic hero is someone who dies for personal dignity. Willy does die for his dignity. "Those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them." (Miller. *Tragedy of the Common Man*) Willy, in his ideas and action of committing suicide, fits in that category. In Act 2, Willy reveals his desires to win back Biff's respect by committing suicide. During one of his illusions, he says that "Ben that funeral will be massive... that boy will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realize I am known" (Miller pg. 126). In trying to persuade Biff that their father is a great man, Willy will not accept any challenge to his dignity. He refuses to realize that the ideals he set for himself and for Biff are false and that he in fact is not loved by all. Willy is not a good father for many reasons. First, he makes his job his first priority. He travels extensively. He fails to give love and time to his family as one father and husband should give. His love for Biff is based on his achievement as an athlete and when Biff loses the scholarship, Willy was so mad that he no longer loved Biff as he once did. Willy wants Biff to be successful like his brother Ben. Furthermore Willy is unable to admit his faults because he has too much pride. Unlike a true tragic hero, Willy does not admit his own errors and his false pride.

Thus in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* it is undeniable that Hamlet's tragic flaw is his inaction which springs from number of factors such as fatalism, moral and spiritual ideals, repressed sexual desires and inability to co-ordinate thoughts and actions. Whereas in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* Miller places his protagonist as a tragic hero: not a classical but a modern tragic hero. A pathetic tragic hero in 1940's America who quests for self identity because of the harsh outcome of the commercialized world. Loman's major tragic flaw was that he was not true to himself. Loman coverts the wrong dream. Miller creates a hero of modernism with an influence from the social movements in his era. Thus, he revises both the classical tragedy and tragic hero to create his favorite subject of the modern-day tragedy.

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