

## **Tragic Death of a Salesman: A Hegelian Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Pulitzer winner Death of a Salesman is a play written by Arthur Miller and first performed in 1949. The play portrays a period in which the negative effects of the Great Depression, which turned the 'American dream' into a struggle for survival, were felt by its great intensity. The play is about the struggle of an ordinary man, Willy Loman, and his family trying to survive in a materialistic and ruthless atmosphere. The same year the play was first performed, Arthur Miller wrote an article which is called 'Tragedy and the Common Man'. In this article, he claims that the ordinary man in modern life may also be the subject of tragedy as the great heroes of ancient times and that the works of modern tragedies can meet the standards set by older theories of tragedy. In order to investigate if this claim is provable or not, Arthur Miller's own work Death of a Salesman examined according to the criterion of G.W. Hegel's theory of tragedy which has been the most influential and discussed next to Aristotle's theory of tragedy. As a result of the study, Miller's claim proved itself to be true since the play Death of a Salesman meets all the standards set by Hegel.*

**Keywords:** Hegel; Theory of Tragedy; Arthur Miller; *Death of a Salesman* .

## I. Introduction

Besides Aristotle's well-known account of tragedy, the most influential and the most quoted philosopher who developed a theory of tragedy is G.W. Hegel (1770-1831) (Roche 11). Although tragedy has always been a topic of discussion throughout history, Hegel is the first philosopher who attempted to make a comprehensive analytical theory of tragedy (Schmidt 89). For Hegel, what lies in the essence of tragedy is the collision of equally justified yet one-sided truths which are destined to destroy each other to be reconciled and united to create a new and superior form of truth (Hegel 1198). A great many of things have changed in modern works of tragedies when compared to the first examples written in Ancient Greece. Besides decoration and tolls which have metamorphosed in time; we do not traditionally have features such as masks, actors in the role of women or chorus on modern stage (1188). However, the struggle of man to preserve his dignity and find a place in society is a timeless theme which is handled frequently in modern drama as well. Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize winner play *Death of a Salesman* is one of them. Written in 1949, an era wherein Americans witnessed the bitterness of two great World Wars and just went through the Great Depression which lasted more than a decade, the tragic protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, exemplifies the battle of everyday person in America to stay alive in a careless, materialistic social system. Miller wrote an article entitled 'Tragedy and the Common Man' the same year he wrote *Death of a Salesman*. In this famous article, Miller advocates that the ordinary man in modern life is as suitable as the great heroes of ancient times to become the subject of tragedy. In the 'Tragedy and the Common Man' Miller says:

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instances, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations (Miller, 2015: 8).

According to Miller, what awakens the tragic feelings in human beings is the presence of a character that is ready to put his entire life into the fight of preserving his dignity (8). And modern man struggles for his dignity in the harsh conditions of materialistic modern societies not less than the past. Besides having financial problems such as unemployment, unfavourable working conditions, high rents and prices, many people in modern life endure the pains of feeling alone, insecure and uncared in the materialistic world.

As Abbotson states, Miller wrote *Salesman* with the intention of proving that 'a modern tragedy that adopted older tragic theories to allow for a common man as tragic protagonist' is capable of satisfying their criterion.(Abbotson 66). In order to investigate the verifiability of Miller's claim, in this study, Miller's modern tragedy *Death of a Salesman*, and Willy Loman as the modern tragic hero of the play in particular will be applied the principles of Hegelian tragedy theory and if the play and its protagonist Willy Loman overlaps with these principles or not will be discussed.

## II. Analysis

Alongside his famous works, such as *Phenomenology of Mind* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, which give us great insights about his notion of tragedy indirectly through his analysis of ancient works of tragedy, Hegel elaborates on the 'Principles of Tragedy, Comedy and Drama' in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. In this work, he provides an account of his ideas of tragic in relation to his general philosophy of dialectics and ethics and also makes a comparison between ancient and modern tragedy.

For Hegel, tragedy emerges from a hero's just and courageous positioning of himself in a rightful position. Even if the position he takes is a fair one, he fails to see that everything comes into existence with its opposite and he violates the contrary but equally right position by disregarding it. These two opposite positions are both justified and true in their own nature, but each can only exist by denying or violating the other position or its moment of truth. As a result, both sides are morally involved in guilt (Hegel 1196).

Willy Loman, the protagonist of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a cut out for this one-sided positioning of himself. He is a salesman in his sixties, a family man married to two sons and a loving wife. Despite his brilliant days in his career years ago, his attempts of success are all back fired. He cannot sell his samples, he is not cared about by his workfellows and customers any more. However, he cannot accept his current situation. He still persists in his old belief that being well-liked is the key of success and the only thing a man would need to get on in the world. His sons, Biff and Happy, are very much influenced by their father and their self-reliance drowns them into laziness and moral looseness. Willy compares his sons to Bernard, hardworking and caring son of his old friend Charley and a highly successful lawyer. Willy looks down on Bernard while praising his own sons:

WILLY: That's just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. » Willy Loman is here!« That's all they have to know, and I go right through (Miller, 1998: 20-21).

Although Willy is an obstinate man who cannot align himself according to the needs of changing society, it is obvious that he loves his family, he wants to make a living for them and most importantly he wants to be recognized and respected by the society. His refusal to give up what he deserves as a human being is the just and courageous positioning of himself which is mentioned by Hegel. However, his false-pride and also his passion for material success violate other values. For instance, Willy advises Biff to tell lies about himself and to pretend as someone higher than his current position before Biff meets Mr. Oliver, his former boss, to borrow money from him:

WILLY: Will you let me finish? (To Biff.) Tell him you were in the business in the West.  
Not farm work.  
BIFF: All right, Dad.  
LINDA: I think everything...

WILLY (going right through her speech): And don't undersell yourself. No less than fifteen thousand dollars. (Miller, 1998:50)

It can be claimed that Willy's desire to see his children succeed in life, even much more than he was able to, is an inherent feeling in any caring parent. We can sympathize with that easily. Yet because of the same desire, he engrains dishonesty in his children.

Secondly, the tragic hero is both innocent and guilty at the same time, for Hegel. He is great and innocent because he sacrifices himself by acting on the behalf of the just principle; he is flawed and guilty at the same time, because he commits a crime by violating another good or will. One can be guilty only if he has the freedom of choice and makes his decisions accordingly. However, tragic characters only do what they have to do. 'They act out of this character of theirs, on this 'pathos', because this character, this 'pathos' is precisely what they are: their act is not preceded by either hesitation or choice' (Hegel 1196). Hegel points that the strength of great characters lies in the quality that they do not choose but they are in the centre of their deeds and actions. Tragic characters are who they are, and this is why they are great (1196). At this point, we also see that Miller's ideas agree with Hegel's. In his article, 'Tragedy and the Common Man', Miller advocates that people who are passive and self-imposed against situations and people who violate our dignity of humanity are 'flawless' (Miller, 2015:8). The opposite, namely, being in defiance is the flaw which makes the tragic characters great and guilty at once.

The 'flaw', or crack in the character, is really nothing-and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are 'flawless.' Most of us are in that category. (8)

We can see this feature of the tragic hero in the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, as well. Willy is guilty, because he is searching for easy success and wealth. He despises hardworking of others and he escapes into illusions to avoid the bitter reality of his condition. Moreover, he cheats on his loving wife. He sees a woman during his work trips in South. Last time they meet, Willy brings her a pair of stockings as a present as well. Willy leaves her place feeling satisfied with her praises. On his return back home, he finds Linda mending a pair of silk stockings sitting at the kitchen table (Miller, 1998: 25-26). With guilt and anger, Willy yells at her wife:

WILLY (*noticing her mending*): What's that?

LINDA: Just mending my stockings. They are so expensive...

WILLY (*angrily, taking them from her*): I won't have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out! (*Linda puts the stockings in her pocket.*) (26)

It can be assumed that Willy's need of being adequate for someone is the reason for his affair with another woman. It is an escape from his sense of guilt towards Linda who loves him unconditionally although he is no longer able to afford a living for the family. However, cheating on his wife also makes him feel guilty; because he loves his wife and he wants to deserve her.

We can also see feeling of guilt in Willy's mind. For instance, he tries to commit suicide several times because of his failures in business. He wants to correct his own mistakes in Biff. He advises Biff for his meeting with Mr. Oliver saying 'talk as little as possible, and don't crack any jokes' as him by regretting his jokes without any concern for appropriateness. (47). We can multiply the examples of wrong deeds of our tragic hero. However, we cannot ignore his pure intention to gain respectability and leave something behind him for his family. This pure idea makes him great and innocent simultaneously.

Hegel's theory of tragedy is substantially connected to his general philosophy of dialectics. According to Hegel, contradiction and negativity open the gates for betterment since this is the dialectic progression of history (Roche 12). As Roche states, when we look back through the history, we can see that historical conflicts, crises and transitions all arise during paradigm shifts. Some positions or values are rooted in the history while some others are the precursors of the future. In this transitional process, sometimes we witness the struggle of a self-sacrificing hero for the sake of a new and unacknowledged truth, and sometimes an obstinate hero who does not give up his traditional position in the face of already accepted truths (12).

In *Death of a Salesman*, we see that, Willy is the representative of the second type of hero who tries to hold on to his traditional position. He is stock-minded and he cannot accept the changing reality of his time. The play was written in the course of a period during which major changes and political events reshaped the socio-economic reality of society. The wealth of 1920s came to an end with 1929 Wall Street Crash, the beginning of an economic collapse which is called Great Depression. Willy visits Howard, the son of an old friend, to ask him for a job but Howard just ignores him. We see the yearning for good times in Willy's desperate and angry reaction to Howard:

WILLY (stopping him). I'm talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see — I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away — a man is not a piece of fruit! (After a pause.) Now pay attention. Your father — in 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions.

HOWARD (impatiently): Now, Willy, you never averaged... (Miller, 1998:61-62)

Willy remembers the year of 1928 which is the year just before Great Depression. He is longing the days when he was respected in good economic condition. The forces of materialism and capitalism infected moral values of society. There is no place for kindness, consideration or sincerity in the materialistic world.

After the World War II, industrial growth also changed the way people live their lives. The cities were more crowded than before but there were far fewer job opportunities for people.

LINDA: Well, after all, people had to move somewhere.

WILLY: No, there's more people now.

LINDA: I don't think there's more people. I think

WILLY: There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink from that apartment house! And another one on the other side... (...) (7)

Advances in technology also affected the lifestyles of American people in 1940s. When Willy goes to Howard's office, he finds him enjoying his new wire-recording machine. Howard says that it was the most fascinating thing he had ever found. However, Willy does not know what it is for and he has no idea about how to use it (56). His inability to use the new technology is so much alike his inability to cope with the socio-economic changes of his time. These are indicators of a transition period in America in which crises and conflicts arouse. Nevertheless, these crises and conflicts are essential, as Hegel claims, as part of the inevitable progression of man and his surroundings.

As another characteristic of Hegel's theory of tragedy, the tragic hero is destructive and self-destructive at the same time. Not only the tragic hero denies the validity of the other position, but the other position as well does the same. Hence, the action of each hero is not only destructive of the other, but eventually self-destructive (Hegel, 1199). In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman passes his wrong ideas of easy success to his sons leading them into failure in their lives. Willy ignores their dreams for their own future and forces them to take the same path he did. But he only makes them unhappy. His sons, on the other hand, especially Biff, oppose their father as well. His anger and repugnance against his father is never-ending. Biff tries to make Willy face the truth that he is not the man he pretends to be:

BIFF: I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour,

Willy I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

WILLY (directly to Biff): You vengeful, spiteful mut! (Miller, 1998:105-106)

Willy's one-sided rightfulness not only destructs him with great sufferings but also makes his family, especially his two sons, suffer and destruct them as well. Like Don Quixote's fight against the windmills, he is struggling for what he knows by his own heart to be accepted by others. However, as he does not accept his own condition, he also does not see acceptance by the world around him.

The next characteristic of Hegelian tragedy is that suffering for Hegel, unlike Aristotle, is not an undeserved or unfair suffering. He believes that one-sided position of the tragic hero is justified through suffering, despite his fall (Hegel, 1197-1198). The hero's sacrifice often makes great changes in the society. Throughout the world history, this has been the position of the heroes. Let us think of Galileo Galilei. When he claimed that the world is not flat, he had to face with great opposition. He suffered because of his ideas and was even punished with home-imprisonment. But now, we know that he was one of the greatest scientists and philosophers of all times. In the *Death of a Salesman*, through Linda's conversation with Biff, we come to know how much in pain Willy was. Linda learns from the insurance inspector, who came to visit her, that Willy's car accidents in the last year weren't really accidents but they were deliberate. What is more, Linda finds out that Willy has attempted to hang himself a few times at the cellar. She realizes his plan set up with rubber pipes:

LINDA: (...) Every day I go down and take that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? I don't know what to do. I live from day to day, boys. I tell you, I know every thought in his mind. It sounds so old-fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him. (*She is bent over the chair, weeping, her face in her hands.*) Biff, I swear to God! Biff, his life is in your hands! (Miller,1998:43)

As it is clear from the quotation above, Willy Loman suffers so deeply. His effort to impose his wrong ideas on his children, his obstinacy to stay the same in the changing world drags him into pain. He insists on his traditional ideas but the world around him is changing ceaselessly. One cannot stand in front of the time. The progress is unavoidable. Therefore, Willy's suffering is not unfair, but necessary.

Hegel gives a special attention to the reception of tragedy. Hegel too, like Aristotle, thinks that art has a moral duty. For him, the evil cannot be the subject matter of the art. At this point, Hegel agrees with Aristotle's idea that tragedy purifies human soul through evoking the feelings of pity and fear. One has to fear not the external fate, but the violation of the 'ethical substance' in the other position. Hegel assigns a new and different meaning to Aristotle's concept of 'pity' as 'sympathy'. We identify ourselves with the tragic hero and feel sympathy for his actions but we also affirm the fact that his one-sidedness is nonetheless in a way justified by the power of Absolute. The tragic character must have a true aim to arouse that feeling of pity in the audience even if he takes the wrong path at the beginning. A real tragedy may only satisfy our feelings by eternal justice's alignment of moral forces in a harmonic position. Hence, the essential law of the universe emerges with a great victory (Hegel, 1997-1198).

Above mere fear and tragic sympathy there therefore stands that sense of reconciliation which the tragedy affords by the glimpse of eternal justice. In its absolute sway this justice overrides the relative justification of one-sided aims and passions because it cannot suffer the conflict and contradiction of naturally harmonious ethical powers to be victorious and permanent in truth and actuality (Hegel, 1198).

The protagonist of *Death of a Salesman* is a character who represents the struggle of modern man in the materialistic society. We can easily identify ourselves with his suffering and his inability to go beyond his limits. We do not only feel pity for him but we also sympathize with him. Although he makes mistakes, we know that he has a pure intention behind them. The ethical substance in his actions, namely, his demand for respect and dignity as a human, is valid for everyone.

And lastly, according to Hegel, death is the final equalizer, the 'absolute master'. In tragedies, it is usually through the death of the tragic character that justification of the conflicting sides are ensured, one-sidedness which prevents them from being accepted is demolished and the conflicting forces in the action come into an agree men. It is the moment what Hegel calls 'eternal justice' (Hegel, 1198).The death of the tragic hero represents the reconciliation of the one-sided positions.

Towards the end of the play, *Death of a Salesman*, Biff and Willy quarrels. Biff screams the reality of his false pride to his father's face. During his emotional crises, he breaks down into

tears. At this moment, Willy realizes that Biff still loves him (Miller, 1998: 106). It has been the only thing he needed and asked for: To be loved and cared by the ones who he cares for. Then, he decides that he can die peacefully. He decides to commit suicide and drives off his old car to crush (109). Willy's death represents that the conflict is finally over. Conflicting forces are justified and now they are balanced. Willy does not die in grief because he knew that he was loved by his family and Biff. His suicide stands for his acceptance of his false pride. The death of the *Salesman* stands for the fact that one cannot claim his individuality without any respect to universality.

In *Aesthetics*, Hegel also provides a comparison between ancient and modern tragedy. Although modern tragedy which he refers is the time of Shakespeare or Goethe, some of his assumptions are also suitable for the modern tragedy in our sense. Hegel discusses the possibility of inner collisions which is abundant in modern tragedy of our day. As the conflicting values or positions embodied in a single self, it may be less dramatic but they allow for richer characterization and better rhetoric (Hegel, 1228). Internal collisions, on the other hand, cause indecisiveness in the character. It is an indication of weakness which is not found in ancient tragic heroes who strictly holds on their part of morality (Hegel, 1229). Although the conflict is not only in Willy's mind in *Death of a Salesman*, we are able to see his mind through his illusions. It is an experimental work of art in which Miller tried to present both the present and past transmitting from one scene to another without any apparent breaks (Abbotson, 59). This feature provides a richer character development and more effective rhetoric from the characters in the play.

### III. Conclusion

As a conclusion, the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy, meets all the major characteristics of Hegelian tragedy. He represents the condition of modern man in society. His one-sided rightfulness, namely, his struggle for being valued and respected, makes him a great hero but his false-pride cause him suffer a lot and finally leads him to the end. Willy neither fights against arrogant gods nor for a throne as the heroes of ancient times but his struggle for survival in a materialistic and careless society is as difficult as the struggle of ancient heroes, perhaps even harder. He is the one innocent and guilty; destructive and self-destructive at the same time. But the main issue is that it is not possible to maintain one's singularity in the face of universal. This conflict is resolved by the power of death, the absolute master. Willy's death is both a victory and a defeat at the same time: The victory of his fight for his dignity and the defeat of his rigidity against change and progress. Therefore, both sides reconcile with each other to form a superior truth, as a result of actualization of Divine in the real world which is the main subject of tragedy for Hegel. Miller's claim in his article, 'Tragedy and the Common Man', that modern tragedies written according to older tragic theories still allow the common man as tragic hero is proved by his own work. Although Miller generally refers to Aristotle in his article, it can be deducted that he must have also influenced by Hegel's theory of tragedy.



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