

**A MODERN TRAGIC HERO IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAY *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*\***

**ARTHUR MILLER'İN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* OYUNUNDA MODERN BİR TRAJİK KAHRAMAN**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses Arthur Miller's character, Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman* in terms of his being a tragic hero. There are several debates on Willy Loman pointing out that he is not a tragic hero in classical tragedy. The classical definition of a tragedy points out that "tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of high estate because of his tragic flaw." Still Loman cannot be totally considered as a classical tragic hero since he is a common man. He is indeed a modern tragic hero in 1940's America whose desire is to be "someone" in the society. His problems stem from his own delusions, the American Dream turning sour, and misunderstanding his job and family. Loman is a modern tragic hero turning the American dream into American Nightmare because of his personal flaw. For those reasons, this play can be classified as a "bourgeois" tragedy. This modern tragic hero represents individuals who try to survive and quest for self identity in a capitalistic commercialized world.

**Key Words:** American dream, tragedy, modern tragic hero

**Özet:**

Bu çalışma, Arthur Miller'ın *Death of a Salesman* adlı oyunundaki karakter Willy Loman'nın trajik bir kahraman olmasını tartışır. Willy Loman'nın klasik trajedi tanımına göre trajik bir kahraman sayılamayacağı ile ilgili birçok görüş ileri sürülür. Klasik Trajedi tanımına göre "trajedi, trajik bir karakterin kendi hatası yüzünden yüksek bir mevkiden düşerek ölüm ile sonuçlanan istisnai bir felaket hikayesidir". Yine de Loman tamamen klasik trajik bir kahraman olarak düşünülemez, çünkü o sıradan bir insandır. Gerçekte o, toplumda "birisi" olma isteği olan 1940'ların Amerika'sındaki modern bir trajik kahramandır. Problemleri kendi yanlışlıklarından, işinin ve ailesinin yanlış anlaşılmasından dolayı Amerikan Rüyasının gerçekleşmemesiyle ortaya çıkar. Loman, kişisel hatası yüzünden Amerikan Rüyasını Amerikan Kabusuna dönüştüren

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\* This paper has been presented at Pamukkale University BAKEA: Hero(ine) (International Symposium of Western Cultural and Literary Studies) Conference on 8 October 2009. This is a revised version of the paper.

modern bir trajik kahramandır. Bu sebeplerden dolayı oyun, “burjuvazi trajedisi” olarak sınıflandırılabilir. Bahsettiğimiz modern trajik kahraman hayatta kalabilme mücadelesi veren ve sanayileşmiş kapitalist bir dünyada kendi kimliklerini bulmaya çalışan bireyleri temsil eder.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Amerikan Rüyası, trajedi, modern trajik kahraman

## 1. Introduction

*Death of a Salesman*, produced in 1949, has become a classic of modern American theatre. It is a story of an average salesman with a dream of being rich and well-liked. This is a tragic story of a salesman called Willy Loman, whose past and present are mixed up with expressionistic scenes. There are several debates on Willy Loman pointing out that he is not a tragic hero in classical tragedy. For instance, Allan Lewis (1970) points out that there is “need for redefining tragedy in the contemporary theatre” (47), because Miller’s character Willy Loman is a reflection of modern tragic hero therefore “Aristotelian concepts weigh heavily on an altered world” (Lewis, 1970, 47). In other words, it is not easy to apply the classical definition of “a tragic hero” to a “modern tragic hero”. Bigsby (1982) also draws attention to Miller who contributes much to the emergence of the new dramatic form and new formal structure in his plays (91). Moreover, Arthur Miller redefines the classical concepts of tragedy and tragic hero, derived from Aristotle, in his play *Death of a Salesman*, and the product of this redefinition is the protagonist Willy Loman. If we are to examine if Willy Loman represents a tragic hero, we need to define what tragedy is and who a tragic hero is. The purpose of this paper is to depict Willy Loman not as a classical tragic character, but as a pathetic modern tragic hero of 1940s American bourgeois tragedy of an ordinary man. In this paper, I shall both examine the classical definition of Aristotelian tragedy and Miller’s definition of tragedy in “Tragedy and the Common Man” in order to reveal how Willy Loman can be contextualized as a tragic hero. I will attempt to apply Miller’s above mentioned essay to his play *Death of a Salesman*, which might be the key point in identifying Miller’s protagonist.

First of all, I shall discuss the classical definition of tragedy and tragic hero. If one examines Aristotelian definition of tragedy, one may perceive that it neither fully explains nor embraces the protagonist Willy Loman. Aristotle defines tragedy as follows:

an 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; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Ch VI, 36)

Thus, tragedy should arouse pity and terror with a tragic hero, a man “who neither is superior in virtue and justice, nor undergoes a change of misfortune because of vice and wickedness, but because of some error, and who is one of those people with a great reputation and a good fortune.”(Ch XIII, 42) In this case, it is important to answer the question of who can be considered as a tragic hero? According to the

dictionary definition of tragic hero, it is a main character in a tragedy that makes an error in his or her actions that lead to his or her downfall. According to Aristotle, common characteristics of a tragic hero are as follows:

1. The tragic protagonist has a flaw in his character, most frequently of Hubris, which is overweening pride, haughtiness, or arrogance eventually leads to his downfall, 2. A tragic hero is often of noble birth and is almost universally male, 3. Peripeteia: a reversal of fortune brought about by the hero's tragic flaw, 4. The hero learns something from his mistake and faces with serious decision. In other words, his actions result in an increase of self-awareness and self-knowledge, 5. There may sometimes be supernatural involvement, 6. The audience must feel pity and fear for this character, because suffering is a result of the hero's own volition, it is not wholly deserved. (Aristotle 12)

## **2. Miller subverting the classical tragedy and the tragic hero**

Arthur Miller in his play questions the validity of the classical concepts of tragedy or tragic hero, derived from Aristotle, as the fall of a man of high rank or a man of great importance in the world. In fact, the play raises counter example to Aristotle's characterization of tragedy as the downfall of a great man. However, Willy Loman is not of "noble birth", quite the contrary he is a common man, though certainly has Hamartia, a tragic flaw or error in judgment, his downfall is that of an ordinary man (a "low man"). Loman's flaw comes down to a lack of self-knowledge like Sophocles's Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*. However, Loman's downfall threatens not a city unlike Oedipus, but only a single family, the Lomans. In the light of this perspective, Loman may not be considered as a tragic hero in terms of classical definition. Still, Miller places his protagonist as a tragic hero: not a classical but a modern tragic hero. Perhaps one should consider the alteration in the society and the needs of people adopting themselves according to the changes in an era.

In the 1930s the Great Depression, economics dominated politics and the American Dream turned into a nightmare. What once was the land of opportunity and hope became a land of desperation. In other words, the land of hope, optimism, and the symbol of prosperity became the land of despair. Many farmers migrated to the big cities in the hope of getting a job. Instead of advancement, survival became the major problem. By the emergence of the World War II, the situation deteriorated, which inevitably influenced the lives of ordinary American people in a negative way. The situation of those people may be observed as a representative everyman, Willy Loman and his family. Miller being the best-known American playwrights after WWII draws reader's attention to the devastating effects of the economics and politics of the era on a fictional character that mostly represents a member of an ordinary American family with an American Dream/Nightmare. Loman was repressed and ignored

in the capitalistic society. He tries to survive and be “noticed” like the other ordinary men in the society:

. . . Don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally paid to such a person. (Act 1, 44)

Linda in this quotation speaks for the ordinary man in the society. Linda tries to protect her husband from the negative effects of the system of Capitalism that enslaves and exploits Willy. As Willy is the victim of the system, Linda expresses her humanity protesting its outcome on the lives and psychology of ordinary people. Still, Willy runs after his ideals for reaching his goal as Uncle Ben, who is a representative of his ideals and fantasy, and who realized the American Dream:

Like a young god. Hercules – something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him . . . And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out – Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent can never really fade away! (Act 1, 54)

Willy tries to be like Uncle Ben who is successful in realizing the American Dream. Willy likes to be respected and wants to become a star. He wants to get rid of his position as a “common man” and be rich.

At the beginning of the Post-war era, a vast majority of Americans as well as people all around the world migrated to urban centers to make their living conditions better. The migration ceased the traditional farming, and transformed people into nucleus families. The negative affects of migration and longing for the past and urban life echo in Willy's statement: “. . . they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks . . . the street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard” (Act 1 12). As Beşe emphasizes, Miller raises issues as the “impacts of environmental forces on the individual and his family and the responsibilities or irresponsibility of family and society in relation to each other” (Beşe, 2003, 3). Miller observes the process of materialism, capitalism, and false success policies which bring disillusionment, isolation, and alienation.

Post-war American dramatists attempt to redefine domestic life that becomes a disappointing matter because it mostly illustrates disintegration in the family life. As Bigsby suggests, the central theme of the twentieth-century American drama is “alienation: man from God, from his environment, from his fellow/man and from himself” (Bigsby, 1982, 125). It is a world in which the relationship between man and environment is destroyed.

For the writers of 1930s, alienation is seen as a sense of loss, bred by social injustice. In fact, the effects of alienation could be seen in various stages

of Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odet, Lillian Hellman, Edward Albee and Miller. Fromm describes the cause of this alienation;

not only economic, but also the personal relations between men have this character of alienation. Man does not only sell commodities, he sells himself and feels himself as a commodity . . . If he sought after, he is somebody; if he is not popular, he is simply nobody (Fromm, 1960, 103).

The position of Willy Loman desperately believing in the idea that he is "well liked" secures his place in the society; because this is the only way out that he can be accepted as an individual having some value. In fact, Willy is partly the victim of an unjust competitive society: "Willy is a victim of society. But he is also a consenting victim, or a victim of himself. He accepted vulgar, debased, and false systems of values". (Krutch, 1957, 238) As Lewis (1970) observes, ". . . the behavior of an individual in love, sex, or parental relations is evidence of the choices imposed by social necessity". (46) Accordingly, Miller placed this personal drama as a tragedy of modern American family of post-WWII era. The purpose is to find a place for his most "tragic" fictive characters of his era.

Miller is concerned with redefining tragedy in a contemporary theatre. In this sense, Aristotelian concepts of tragedy were adapted to the altering conditions of the world. Although Willy Loman does not fall from a great height, his pride destroys him by placing him as a modern tragic figure. Miller's redefinition of tragedy is most significant in his 1949 essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man", which was published in the *New York Times*, and this essay also appeared in the preface prepared for *Death of a Salesman*.

Perhaps, it will be meaningful to rethink about the meaning of the classical tragedy while analyzing Miller's views on tragedy. Miller, in his essay, began by stating that, "In this age few tragedies are written" (1974, 894). Before Miller's *Death of a Salesman* there was only one type of tragedy – which fits into the Aristotelian definition. For Aristotle, plays of tragedy had to revolve around kings, gods, or people of high class. Miller explains that "the common man is apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (1974, 894). It is this belief that Miller used a common man, Willy Loman, as the subject of his tragedy. He states that ". . . 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". (1974, 894) Willy's sense of dignity is found in his family most notably in his son Biff. Willy transfers his dreams of being great onto Biff. Unfortunately, Biff proves to be a failure in the world. To regain this personal dignity, Willy commits suicide with a belief that his insurance money will make Biff "magnificent". In this sense, Miller (1974) defines tragedy as: "the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly" (894) and "his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment" (895). In fact, Willy's death becomes a "family drama", not a means of reaching the so-called success for the rest.

Miller's play represents a democratization of the ancient form of tragedy; the play's protagonist is himself obsessed with the question of greatness, and his downfall arises directly from his misconception of himself as someone capable of greatness. Loman says; ". . .[b]ecause 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". (Act 1, 25-6) In other words, Loman's major tragic flaw was that he was not true to himself. Loman covets the wrong dream. He believes that the American Dream<sup>1</sup> is to be rich. He thinks that the way to get rich is obtained either by having a good personality or "being liked", but not through hard work. In fact, as Biff recurrently reminds the audience the fact that Loman "is liked, but he's not well liked" (Act 1, 25) and in the Requiem, Biff states that Loman "had the wrong dreams. . . . He never knew who he was" (1949, 111).

Miller defines flaw or "crack in the character" as; "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what one conceives to be a challenge to one's dignity . . ." (1974, 895). Loman fulfills many of the requirements of being a tragic hero. Willy is not "flawless" in his actions, which makes him a tragic hero by Miller's standards. Willy's main flaw is being unable to see things in a more realistic perspective.

Willy does not actually have one tragic flaw, but he has many (disloyal, head, strong, short tempered, proud, false etc). He has an unwillingness to submit passively to the established order and values. As Aristotle declares; the tragic hero learns from his mistake leading him to self-awareness. This is not the case with Willy. He is unable to see the path to full awareness and self-realization. He is unable to learn from his mistake. Willy's affair with a woman in Boston completely changes his son Biff's life when he discovers his father's infidelity. Biff's faith in his father is destroyed after he encountered situation. This is the cause for Biff's failure in life. Bernard, Biff's friend, reminds this fact by stating;

BERNARD. . . and he came back after that month and took his sneakers – remember those sneakers with 'University of Virginia' printed on them? He was so proud of those, wore them everyday. And he took them down in the cellar, and burned them up in the furnace. . . . I've often thought of how strange it was that I knew he'd given up his life. What happened in Boston, Willy? (Act 2, 74)

Willy consistently keeps his American dream without ever bothering himself about the consequences of his illicit affair. He is ignorant about the real

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<sup>1</sup> The American Dream is a national ethos of the US in which democratic ideals are perceived as a promise of prosperity for people. They can achieve a "better, richer, and a happier life" which fully explains the American dream ideal.

reason of Biff's failure, still he does not learn from his mistake although this is reminded by the character Bernard.

The audience do not feel "pity and fear" for this character as Aristotle defined the case as one of the characteristics of a tragedy. Willy commits suicide even though they are free of debt for the mortgage they have been paying for years. Linda says, "I can't understand it. At this time especially. First time in thirty-five years we were just about free and clear. He only needed a little salary. He was even finished with the dentist" (Miller, 1949, 110). Willy excites pity only in the sense of his defeat and his inability to become a success or teach his children how to make their lives successful. Besides, the author intentionally reflects Willy's mobility in his mental state where he talks with an unseen person especially when he cannot except or endure the outcome of the present situation. There is a shift in his mind, especially to that of past situations or past people. While shifting back, he creates his own future which never comes true. For instance, when Willy gets fired by Howard the music is heard and Willy starts to talk to Ben, his brother who recently died:

WILLY. Oh, Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer?  
Did you wind up to Alaska deal already? (Act 2, 66)

This kind of shift decreases the tension. In other words, the flashbacks and fantasies out of time "enrich the dramatic force of the play" (Miller, intr. xv). Let alone feeling "pity" and "fear" for Willy who is talking to himself whenever he is in an unconscious state of mind, the reader/audience is put in horror. This is recurrently seen until the end of the play where Willy commits suicide.

Willy dies for the cause of his so-called "American ideal". In this sense, as Leech argues that Willie's concern is sociological rather than universal: "he is the victim of the American dream rather than of the human condition" (Leech, 1969, p. 38). Happy, who is not as realistic as his brother Biff, draws attention to Willy's dreams that never came true: ". . . I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's only dream you can have - to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him." (Miller, 1949, p. 111) Miller discusses "the concept of the 'Tragic victory', and "although a man's death is a terrifying thing, it can be an assertion of bravery", as well. Bigsby (1987) interprets Loman's suicide as "designed to liberate the next generation" (p. 167). As Miller points out a man who sacrifices himself for a cause should make the audience "feel some kind of elation" (Miller, 1982, p. Xxi) Miller points out "the possibility of victory" in tragedy. "Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won". The tragic hero is "the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity" (Miller, 1974, p. 896) as demonstrated by Willy.

### 3. Conclusion

As a result, Arthur Miller emphasizes his character Willy Loman not as a tragic hero in classical tragedy, but as a modern day tragic hero and a pathetic tragic hero in 1940's America who quests for self identity because of the harsh outcome of the commercialized world. 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. Lewis states that "Aristotelian concepts weigh heavily on an altered world" (1970, 47). In the modernist era (beginning with industrialization late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) a new kind of tragic hero was created out as a reaction to the English Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, and Romanticism. The modern hero does not have to be of a high estate – but rather an "ordinary person". Those ordinary people are mostly affected by materialist and capitalist values as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. The modern hero's story does not necessarily require the protagonist to have the traditional catharsis<sup>2</sup> to bring the story to an end. He may suffer without the ability to change events that are happening to him. The story may end without closure. This new hero of modernism can be called the "modern-day tragic hero", or the "anti-hero". How did this type of anti-hero derive from? What effect/s made the spring of such protagonists? The answer lies perhaps in the social and economical outcomes of the era between the great American Depression and the post-WWII, which affects most of the ordinary Americans whose "American Dreams" are shattered into piece by the cruel Capitalist system. To emphasize such devastating effects of the era, Miller has chosen the genre tragedy by turning its tenets upside down. Thus, Miller revised the classical Aristotelian tragedy creating a successful modern-day tragedy, because as Miller states, "it is time that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – heart and spirit of the average man" (1974, 897). Through this revision, he redefined the tragic hero: Willy Loman, a product of society, became a modern tragic hero crying out the social injustice in a shattered dream.

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<sup>2</sup> It is a Greek word meaning "purification" and "cleansing".



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