

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TRAGIC HERO IN SHAKESPEARE'S  
HAMLET AND MILLER'S DEATH OF A SALESMAN**

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the creation of the tragic hero via Shakespeare's Hamlet in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. In this two-person study about Hamlet & Willy Loman, the study aims to engage with the evolution of tragedy as a cultural phenomenon from its classical origins to its contemporary manifestations. If Hamlet is the archetype of the classical Aristotelian tragic hero of nobility, moral conflict, and fatal flaw, then Willy Loman is representative of the new age re-creation of tragedy, an ordinary person pushed into the heart of a major dramatic event. The research employs a comparative and analytical approach in characterisation of the psychology, society and philosophy surrounding both characters. The struggle at the center of Hamlet with moral responsibility and existential doubt sharply contrasts with Willy Loman's confrontation with social expectations and personal illusions. Though socially ranked, historiographical events, and theatre forms are widely different, themes of human suffering, failure, searching for self, etc. and similar to each other, resonate with everyone on a larger scale. Finally, the conclusion is: tragedy is not confined to kings and princes; common man who, with dreams and reality always fight their way through this struggle. This suggests a shift in importance for literary values and a democratization of tragedy in current literature. The research sheds some light on this issue, particularly in its view of literature as being linked to historical or contemporary cultural and ideological conflicts, but also maintaining relevance relevant today.

**Key words:** Tragic hero, Hamlet, Willy Loman, comparative analysis, modern drama, classical tragedy, internal conflict, Arthur Miller, William Shakespeare

### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of the tragic hero is one of the oldest in dramatic literature. According to Abrahams the tragic hero is typically defined through elements such as internal conflict and inevitable downfall. Rooted in Aristotelian thought, the most common definition of a tragic hero was that of a noble individual who possessed a fatal flaw (hamartia) that would bring about their own demise (Aristotle, 1996). This model can be most properly observed in classical tragedies such as those by William Shakespeare. Indeed, Shakespeare's Hamlet is one of the most deep examinations of the human soul, morality, and existential despair, but it takes it under the banner of classical tragedy. By the twentieth century tragic forms were reformed. Arthur Miller took some liberties here, claiming that the common man can be just as likely as the aristocrat to become tragic. In his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller suggests that contemporary tragedy springs not from noble stature but from one's endeavor to cling to some moral dignity and identity within a complex society. His play Death of a Salesman epitomizes this version of modern tragedy. A great deal of literature on tragic heroes has been written. The structural and philosophical underpinnings of tragedy have been the focus of scholars like Aristotle, Bradley, and Frye. Aristotle's Poetics put forward the essential elements of tragedy, like plot, character, and catharsis. This evolution, like A.C. Bradley would later develop Shakespearean tragedy into a psychological depth of character studies for Hamlet. (Bradley, 2005; Frye, 1957)

Furthermore, in recent years critics have concentrated on the social and ideological dimensions of tragedy, such as the works of Arthur Miller. There has been significant work, but there still remained a gap in a holistic comparison of classical and modern interpretations of the tragic hero in literature. For such a comparison, Hamlet and Willy Loman offer the perfect base. Hamlet is a moral and existential laden prince: Willy Loman is an ordinary salesman juggling ill-considered hopes, aspirations, and the pressure of the world.

This article attempts to compare and contrast the tragic weaknesses of these two characters and to find the source of conflicts within each and the means by which the character achieves his or her tragic doom. Looking at the two texts through a comparative perspective thus suggests one is looking at an aspect of tragedy that has changed between times while being rooted in its universal human meaning. Literature reflects both individual experience and broader cultural realities (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

### **METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS**

This study uses a qualitative research method—textual and comparative analysis of the two main literary texts: Hamlet, by William Shakespeare, and Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller. This work is based on a literary approach and works within the framework of classical literary theories as well as the modern theories of tragedy. It is the comparative method that is mainly used in this research. This method provides evidence of a methodical comparison of the similarities and differences of Hamlet and Willy Loman. Based on the characterization (character traits, motivations, and outcomes) of the two, the study determines which particular characteristics classify them as tragic heroes within their respective contexts. (Eagleton, 2003).

The analytical approach discusses characteristics of their respective texts, such as character development, thematic ideas, and narrative progression. In Hamlet's soliloquies, for example, these speeches are examined so as to reveal his struggle with internal conflict and philosophical ideas. Willy Loman's dialogues and exchanges with others are also analyzed to show his mental instability and social problems in much the same way. The historical-literary approach is used in the work to put each work in its own historical context and situate the work under the context of a certain time period, for example. Shakespeare's Hamlet is considered in its relationship to the Elizabethan world, and particularly the order, hierarchical structure, and divine justice associated with it. Death of a Salesman by Miller, on the other hand, is analyzed in terms of twentieth-century American sociocultural issues such as capitalism, materialism, and the greed-fueled pursuit of the American Dream. Moreover, in the research, intertextuality is used to examine the ways that contemporary drama deals with and rethinks classical traditions. Miller's redefined tragedy presents a direct confrontation with Aristotelian tenets and establishes a conversation between the classical and the modern modes of writing. The analysis of literary texts requires a theoretical framework supported by modern criticism (Lodge, 1998).

The material used in this study consists of primary texts, critical essays, and academic articles. Secondary sources support a theoretical lens of view for exploring the tragic hero. Overall, using multiple different methods ensures a thorough and balanced investigation. This enables the study not simply to look at two different literary works but also to raise in a general way some larger ones on the nature and practical relevance to our own world-historical context on tragedy. Tragedy often reflects the moral and structural tensions within literature (Kernan, 1967).

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Compare Hamlet and Willy Loman: The characterization of those portrayed as tragic heroes. The comparisons between Hamlet and Willy Loman reveal several strong themes, as well as some interesting similarities and differences in their representations as tragic heroes. One major similarity is that they both struggle with something resembling internal conflict. Moral confusion

and doubt, an existential crisis of Hamlet who is consumed with mental distress and an identity crisis is evident in Willy. In both, the characters can only be at a loss as they cannot bring inner longing to bear on reality, and in the end they never reconcile themselves with reality resulting in downfall. A further crucial similarity is that of the tragic flaw. Hamlet isn't willing to act in a timely fashion for lack of urgency, and Willy's self-deception prevents him from acting. These traits are not just personal blemishes and bad decisions, but they are also deeply ingrained personal flaws but they are closely tied to the general themes of each work. According to Greenblatt Hamlet reflects Renaissance concerns about identity and power while Willy Loman's character reveals the psychological pressures of modern society (Corrigan, 1983).

However, the contrast between the two characters is just as evident. Hamlet is aristocratic and has a family name, and is working in a world of intrigue and intrigue of a politician (and a man, of course) and moral confusion. Shakespeare's tragedies emphasize emotional and psychological depth (Leech, 1964). The tragedy is a philosophical one, one concerned with questions of justice, life and death ( Bloom, 2010). However Willy Loman, on the other hand--a poor but also common man, suffering from social and economic factors--is a tragic figure. His suffering shows the strifes and pressures of modern capitalist society is the modern-day world in which his life is put before them and finally it also underlines the American Dream that everyone else does. His fate reflects the economic situation in which Willy Loman's family was born ( Bigsby, 2005).

The structural differences of this and that play, too, illustrate the evolution of tragedy. Hamlet adheres to classical stages as a tragedy: its events are not unrelated: they are led up until the ruin of the state. Death of a Salesman, however, uses a more disjointed narrative, featuring flashbacks and psychological realism. These results indicate that although the components of tragedy are similar, they are expressed differently as a result of historical and cultural situations (Esslin, M. 1961). As a prince or a salesman, the tragic hero is someone who continues to represent the all too common human experience of struggle, failure, and the pursuit of a meaning.

### **CONCLUSION**

Finally, the comparison of William Shakespeare's Hamlet and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman serves as a clear picture of the change and continuity of the tragic hero from one time to another. Indeed, while these works are written in entirely different historical and cultural periods, they examine, across a wide range of periods and time, questions and ideas, they are closely related, Hamlet also represents classical Tragic Heroism according to Aristotle. His downfall is particularly salient given his status, intellectual depth, and moral sense - a strong sense of responsibility.

The moral and ethical issues of inaction which mark his tragic flaw - indecision - prevent him from seeking timely action to prevent this tragedy, and lead ultimately to his downfall. Shakespeare, of course, presents tragedy as a conflict a moral one and, like his hero in which internal questions mark the character's fate--not to use the word "philosophy," but to get beyond existential or moral conflicts reflected in how we, as fellow human beings, feel about life in general. Willy Loman, in contrast, radically shifts the paradigm of tragedy. He is, instead, an ordinary individual; his tragic herodism doesn't depend on great men, either. Miller reinterprets tragedy to psychological and social struggles of the common man. Willy's moral failure isn't to be found in a broad moral principle but in his failure to see the real world or in an inability to believe in unreachable, unattainable success. His tragic flaw is the self-deception that exposes the destructiveness of peer pressure and false ideals.

Moreover, this research shows that although external conditions surrounding the tragedy are altered, the essence of tragedy is not changed. The internal confusion of both Hamlet and Willy Loman brings them to their undoing. Their voices make both readers and readers of their

characters feel empathy and contemplations, that they too want to inspect their own lives and indeed the world around them. In a larger context, the transition from classical to modern tragedy represents changes in social and literary values. Shakespeare's drama centers on fate, morality and order, but Miller's on individual identity, social expectations and psychological realism. (Williams, R. 1966)

This change reflects the way that the literature responds to changing society's concerns that can retain its themes. The tragic hero is so powerful after all the tragic hero is, in the end, the only strong literary being who can express the complicated nature of human life. Whether a prince or salesman, the tragic hero represents the search for direction, dignity self-understanding in an unpredictable world. Both playwrights are able to offer timeless reflection on human failures and success, by introducing us to the suffering that underlies tragedy in literature: in tragedy these two characters--Hamlet and Willy Loman-- offer timeless wisdom that people never need to pay any heed at all for.

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