

## Is Willy Loman a tragic hero?

Many audiences believe that Miller created Willy Loman as a modern-day tragic hero. Before we start investigating whether or not we might agree with this, we need to know the definition of a Renaissance or Shakespearean tragedy and tragic hero.

1. Firstly, look at the characteristics often attributed to a Shakespearean tragedy and a tragic hero:

- The tragic story leads up to, and includes, the death of the hero
- The suffering and calamity are exceptional
- They befall a conspicuous person
- They are themselves of a striking kind
- They are, as a rule, unexpected
- They are, as a rule, contrasted with previous happiness and/or glory
- ...
- Peasants (merely because they're human beings) *do not inspire* pity and fear as great men do
- A Shakespearean tragedy, then, may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of high estate
- ...
- The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they *sent--*
- The calamities of tragedy pass mainly from *actions*, and those, the actions of *men--*
- Shakespeare's tragic heroes are *responsible* for the catastrophe of their falls.

From: an online lecture about Shakespearean Tragedy at the Global Campus website. For the full text visit: <http://global.cscs.edu/engl/264/TragedyLex.htm>

2. Next, read through the following information from Wikipedia which lists the common traits of a tragic hero:

- The hero discovers his fate by his own actions, not by things happening to him.
- The hero sees and understands his doom, and that his fate was revealed by his own actions.
- The hero's downfall is understood by Aristotle to arouse pity and fear.
- The hero is physically or spiritually wounded by his experiences, often resulting in his death.
- A tragic hero is often of noble birth, or rises to noble standing (King Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*).
- The hero learns something from his/her mistake.
- The hero is faced with a serious decision.
- The suffering of the hero is meaningful.
- There may sometimes be supernatural involvement (in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar is warned of his death via Calpurnia's vision and Brutus is warned of his impending death by the ghost of Caesar).
- The *Shakespearean* tragic hero dies at some point in a story, for example *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's characters illustrate that tragic heroes are neither fully good nor fully evil. Through the development of the plot a hero's mistakes rather than his quintessential goodness or evil, lead to his tragic downfall.
- The hero of classical tragedies is almost universally male. Later tragedies (like Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*) introduced the female tragic hero. Portrayals of female tragic heroes are notable because they are rare.

From: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic\\_hero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic_hero)

3. With a partner, go through each of the bullet points from each extract and decide how, and in what ways, if any, Why Loman fulfills the criteria of a tragic hero. It is not enough to say, for example, 'No, he doesn't fit that one because he's not of high status.' Think carefully about the complexities of Loman's character and the ways in which he might be viewed as an important or significant person. Remind yourself of how the other characters perceive Loman and how he was viewed in the past. Think about how Miller juxtaposes the Loman of the past with the Loman of the present by his constant drifting in and out of conversations he had long ago and those he is having now. It is not, therefore, that we are witnessing a tragic hero in the past who has yet to fall, but one in the present who has fallen and is suffering his fate, ultimately leading to his death.

4. Now, read the following which also comes from Wikipedia:

### Modern tragic heroes

In the modernist era a new kind of tragic hero was synthesized as a reaction to the English Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, and Romanticism. The modern hero, rather than falling calamitously from a high position, begins the story appearing to be an ordinary average person; for example, Arthur Miller's Joe Keller in *All My Sons* (1947) is an average man, which serves to illustrate Miller's belief that all people, not just the nobility, are affected by materialistic and capitalist values. The modern hero's story does not require the protagonist to have the traditional catharsis to bring the story to a close. He may die without an epiphany of his destiny and he may suffer without the ability to change the events that are happening to him. The story may end without closure and even without the death of the hero. This new hero of modernism is the antihero and may not be considered by all to even be a tragic hero.

From: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic\\_hero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic_hero)

5. From the above definition do you think Willy Loman fits the criteria of a tragic hero? Again think carefully when making your decisions. Discuss your ideas and be prepared to change your point of view.
6. Now read through the following, written by Miller himself and decide whether or not you think that Loman fits Miller's own definition of a modern day tragic hero (it would be helpful to read all this essay rather than basing your ideas only on this extract):

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 instance, which were enacted by royal beings but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

...

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think 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. ...

Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fatal wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his tragic flaw," a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. 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.

From: <http://www.link.com/miller1.html> Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," from *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (Viking Press, 1978) pp. 3-7. Copyright 1949, Copyright © renewed 1977 by Arthur Miller. Reprint (by permission of Viking Penguin, Inc. All rights reserved.

from: John W. Corrigan. *Tragedy: Vision and Form*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper, 1981.