

## **The tragedy and the human being in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman***

**Marsela Turku**

Faculty of Education

Aleksandër Moisiu University, Albania

marselaturku@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** So far a number of articles have dealt with the American dream and how it is developed in Arthur Miller's plays, especially in *The Death of a Salesman*. However, not enough attention has been paid to the tragedy and the human tragedy in these plays. In the essay 'The Tragedy of the Common Man' Miller expressed his attitudes and beliefs about the nature of literary tragedy, its principles, the social status of the protagonist, what he understands as a human tragedy etc. This paper examines how this play could be interpreted and reread with a primary focus that of "tragedy and the human being", it tries to answer to the question whether the protagonist's fall is a consequence of *hamartia* (a flaw in the character of the protagonist of a literary tragedy that brings about his or her downfall and a key element in tragedy) or whether he is a victim of the values of his community (the main theme of the social drama); which is the role of the American society's values and the conflict between the American dream and the idealization of this dream within the main protagonist; it will also answer the question if his plays are merely 'social dramas' or 'they challenge the tradition of tragedy from its first description in Aristotle's Poetics and the conventions of Shakespearian tragedy.

**Key words:** tragedy, tragic hero, American Dream, archetype etc.

### **Introduction**

American Drama was slower in reaching maturity than either fiction or poetry. A number of critics and literary historians criticized drama for its lacked quality, national originality and integrity when compared with other types of American literature. The gulf between drama and serious literature was not bridged until the beginning of the modern American Drama in 1920, the year of O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*. (Heiney 1958, 324)

Along with Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller represents the culmination of the process of evolution in American Theatre and his play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is often considered as one of the crucial American plays. The press wrote positive reviews about the drama premiere in 1949:

Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view "Death of a Salesman," which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Miller has looked for compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre. (Atkinson 1979, 21)

"But the theatre is an impure craft, and *Death of Salesman* organizes its impurities with an emotional effect unrivalled in postwar drama." (Kenneth Tynan, 1933)

Other critics praised Miller for the use of intermixed time-frames, the important themes; the subject focused controversial attitudes, for 'the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself' (1976, 21), some went further by suggesting that this play would even open new direction for the evolution of American drama.

Almost after sixty years, Kenneth Tynan observations still seem true "[. . .] the theatre is an impure craft..." and it has been for this 'impurities' that this drama has also been criticized a lot. The most persistent criticism concerns the issue of genre and its constituents: to what extends is it a tragedy? Miller himself considered the play to be the tragedy of the common man, but for a group of critics "It is not a tragedy; nor is it rightly speaking, about any man, common or uncommon. It is, however pure Broadway . . ." (Morgan 1976, 32). This paper briefly examines the evolution of the tragedy concept from Aristotle to modern theories and stands on what are tragedy and a tragic hero. It examines and explores the continuing disagreements among academics and by what criteria this play is a tragedy.

## **Classical tragedy**

“The spirit of inquiry meets the spirit of poetry and tragedy is born”  
(Dixon, 51)

Tragedy is an achievement peculiarly Greek. They were the first to perceive and gave it the splendor and the highness that we all know, through the tragedies of Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. The philosophy of the human nature is implicit in the human speech, consequently these tragedies, the result of inquiries done to the human nature which is bound up with evil and dark “gods,” try to present the human being as it really is. The Greek tragedies were characterized by a sincere need to perceive the beauty the reality offered through clarity, calmness and serenity. Their positive attitude towards the gloomy aspects of life somehow creates a magic atmosphere and illumining visions where beauty is transmitted only through truth and vice versa truth implies beauty.

‘A tragedy shows us pain and gives us pleasure thereby. The greater the suffering depicted, the more terrible the events, the more intense our pleasure. The most monstrous and appealing deeds life can show are those the tragedian chooses, and by the spectacle he thus offers us, we are moved to a very passion of enjoyment.’ (Hamilton 1930, 229)

The reader is unable to explain this tragic pleasure. A number of scholars through the centuries have considered this conflicting feeling as the substructure of tragedy and fundamental element in the continuing of the genre. Just to mention, Aristotle called it “Pity and awe,” “and a sense of emotions purified thereby.” For Hegel it is the reconciliation between life’s temporary dissonances resolved into eternal harmony. For Schopenhauer it is the acceptance in the fulfillment of the will, “Thy will be done.” For Nietzsche it is the “the reaffirmation of the will to live in the face of death,” “and the joy of its inexhaustibility when so reaffirmed.”(Hamilton 1930, 230)

It is obvious that “the idea on tragedy’ has escaped its Classical generic determination in Aristotle’s Poetics and had expanded into the role of an intellectual concept of astonishing amplitude and the culmination came in Nietzsche’s *Birth of tragedy* (1872). He claimed that “tragedy arose as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the meditation of the human artists” (1872, 38). For Nietzsche the incarnation of the tragic is the mythic figure of Dionysus who personifies the eternal and original artistic power that first calls the whole world of phenomena into existence . . .” (1872, 143). Nietzsche’s work presents the tragedy as a battle of creative energy against the world of reason and the human beings that inhibit these tragedies are left alone with a feeling of alienation and despair in facing death.

In contrary to Nietzsche’s attitude, Miguel de Unamuno, in his *Tragic Sense of Life* (1913) did not refer to tragedy as a literary genre, but rather he sees it as a complexity of things which springs from the conflict between human nature and social reality. He believes that changes in science and technology are reflected into human reasoning, and in addition these developments manifest themselves in consciousness. He claims that consciousness depends on memory and memory is the bridging gap between the past and the present, between the present and the future, between what we have lost and what we actually have; and these memories do not necessarily have to be happy or joyful ones: “noone has ever proved that man must necessarily be joyful by nature” (1913, 22). He strongly believes that tragedy and tragic are inseparable comrades to the human being and to his identity: “man, because he is man, because he possesses consciousness, is already, in comparison to the jackass or the crab, a sick animal. Consciousness is a disease.” (1913, 22)

## **Arthur Miller’s “The tragedy and the common man”**

*In this age a few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us . . . for one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy or tragedy above us. (Miller 1949, 3)*

Arthur Miller propounded his ideas on tragedy on the essay “Tragedy and the Common man” immediately after the success of his play “Death of a Salesman” in 1949. In his essay he explains his reasons for writing *Death of a Salesman* and what he considers a “traditional tragedy.” Miller claims that he has imbued his character with a mixture of experiences and emotions like grief, sufferings, struggles and ‘small acts of heroism’ and a sole aim, to represent the typical American man and his struggles to accomplish his American Dream which somehow becomes the source of the tragedy. Miller believes that: “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedies in its highest sense of kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis on classical 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” (1949, 3). Therefore, Miller tries to adapt the concept of the tragedy and its protagonist in a contemporary

setting. Probably the sentence taken from Miller's drama that best points the universal poignancy is Linda's comment: "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man."

Thomas E. Porter claims that: "Willy's status in society, his family background is typical; even more of a type is Willy's identity as a Salesman. He is a product of a producer-consumer society in which the go-between is a pivotal figure. Society has labeled him, and Willy has accepted the label; society has offered Willy a set of values and an objective, and Willy has committed themselves to those values and that objective [ . . . ] He has been shaped by a society that believed steadily and optimistically in the myth of success, and he has become the agent and the representative of that society." (Martine 1976, 29)

Nevertheless, Miller's hero fails to grasp a communal sense of success; it seems that instabilities and the flaws of his character bring about his premeditated doom. The first and the main line of this play focuses precisely on the protagonist's failure, but an underground line focuses on the failure of all the ordinary Americans as they respond to this new urban world and their adopting difficulties. It is often thought that its success lays precisely on the personification of the audience with the play's main theme 'the pain of a life passing without recognition or acknowledgement.' Miller's concept on the tragedy of the common man is almost similar with Unamuno's. Therefore, loneliness, sufferings, anonymity, failure, consciousness and the struggle for success are embodied in the tragic sense of life in any urban society.

## **Modern Theories on Tragedy**

### **Modern Tragedy and Steinberg's Theory**

The transformation of the society and the human being influenced even the theatre, consequently in the 20th century the stage was no longer a realm of the melodrama or Classical theatre, neither presented it a glorious time and period. Instead it intends to exhibit or reflect the realism of the world, the individual and the society. In his study "Arthur Miller and the Idea of Tragedy," M. W. Steinberg presents this modern role for the tragedy and Miller's play within the perspective of F. L Lucas: "Serious drama is a serious representation by speech and action of some phrase of human life. [ . . . ] If there is an unhappy ending, we may call it tragedy; but if the play is a serious attempt to represent life it makes no great differences whether or not good fortune intervenes in the last scene" (Steinberg 1969, 81).

A decisive factor in Miller's modern work is the realism of his character, as real as they 'could easily walk off the stage and onto the streets.' Steinberg claims that Miller writes in 'post-Ibsen' fashion and so their 'tragic modern hero' is the embodiment of his society and world. This tragic hero is 'crushed by forces outside himself and by illusions, false ideas spawned by those forces ...' (Steinberg 1969, 82) for instance Nora and Torvald from *A Doll's House*, Lowman from *Death of a Salesman*, etc. Steinberg considers these forces imposed by the society to the human as the only way to evaluate the hero's action, but he does not consider the society as the only cause for the hero's downfall.

Steinberg believes that the modern drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should expose the common man and compare it to the tragic figures of the past. He also supports Miller's idea that the classical tragic archetypes should be brought in a modern context: "As the twentieth century approached, various sources were making for realism in drama with its emphasis on people and situations drawn from ordinary life" (Steinberg 1969, 81) because realism breeds proximity and the closer to the real world the more will the public sympathize with the characters and affect them, as it is described in the Aristotelian sense, by invoking both 'panic' and 'empathy' (in original "phobos" and "eleos") when characters are brought into utter despair. Furthermore the setting is really familiar to the audience, the Lowman family lives in any East coast suburban neighborhood, the neighborhood once bloomed with lilac, wisteria, peonies and daffodils, but now it is "bricks and windows, windows and bricks" and over population and the reminiscence sequences are marked by this scenic change: "The apartment houses are fading out and the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves." (Salesman, 27) The audience reaction is: "I know a man like that," "He is my neighbor." Consequently, Willy presents the failures, disillusionments, and disappointments of all those Americans caught up in the trap of the myth and the moral pressure it generates.

Miller's achievement in this play consists on the elaboration of the character that imbues the passion and pain of a classical tragic hero situated in a contemporary setting and is so real that it can be hard to separate him from the real world.

### **Frye's Theory on the tragic hero**

Academic approach to drama and tragedy has changed over the years and the contemporary philosopher, Stanly Cavell, perfectly describes this evolution:

What else have we had, in major art of the past hundred years, but indirectness: irony, theatricality, yearning, broken form, denial of art, anti-heroes, withdrawals from nature, from man, from the future, and from the past. . . We are not Tragic heroes: our sacrifices will not save the state. Yet we are sacrificed, and we sacrifice. (2002, 178-179)

This evolution in literature and drama has influenced even the formulation and idea of what a tragic hero is. In his study "The Anatomy of Criticism" Northrop Frye provides a definition of what can be a tragic hero:

....the typical tragic hero is somewhere between the divine and the 'all too human.' This must be true even of dying gods: Prometheus, being a god, cannot die, but he suffers for his sympathy for the 'dying ones' (brotoi) or mortal men, and even suffering has something subdivine about it. The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is the mediator with it. (Frye 1957, 207)

Frye states that the hero may be 'the divine or all to human' implying that even a normal human being, a common man without 'superpower' or godlike behavior can as well be a tragic hero as a divine one. Another important point in Frye's definition is the "suffering" which he considers as 'subdivine' and sees them as the only way for the human emotions to arise. Miller's hero Willy Lowman seem to imbue both the elements, he is mortal, is a common man and the audience follow him in his odyssey of sufferings. Prometheus, the suffering god, seems to have a lot in common with Willy. Although Willy is not fettered to a rock enduring endless physical tortures, he still suffers greatly as he is entrapped in his own dreams, in his fantasy world unable to separate the real from the fabricated; he is utterly unable to bear the plight in the real world.

Miller is very careful in the description of Willy as a "brotoi" or "dying man." He prepares the audience in an escalation of situation describing Willy's attempt and unconscious desire to kill himself, for instance the hose found by Biff, Willy's 'strange thoughts' and his continuous attempts to crash his car, till the final crash at the end of the play. Through Willy's death Miller not only demonstrates the inescapable fate of all the human beings which is 'death,' but also the tragedy of a life build upon the commitment to the success ideology, based on Alger myth, the rages to the rags-to-riches romances of the American Dream. Porter claims that "Miller's hero is not simply an individual who has determined an objective and who strives desperately to attain it; he is also representative of an American type, the Salesman, who has accepted an ideal shaped for him and pressed on him by forces in his culture" (Martine 1976, 24), and his tragic ending prods the audience to examine their own existence.

At this point seems almost compulsory the question what caused Willy's downfall? Is caused by 'hamartia' or it is the society's pressure and his alienation from the real world? Aristotle in *Poetics 13* uses the word "hamartia" to designate the cause of a good's man falling, but it has been often translated as a "tragic flaw" and it has been the subject of much debate over the centuries. E. R. Dodds in his "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex" (1966), one of the most influential articles on Aristotle Poetics, demonstrates that Aristotle did not consider the "flaw" as the source of tragedy but by citing everyone of Aristotle's other uses of the term, came to the conclusion that he used the term "to mean an offense committed in ignorance of some material fact and therefore free from . . . wickedness" (Dodds 1966, 19-20). Consequently, for Aristotle, tragedy surfaced from lack of omniscience, from "our common fate of ignorance in face of crucial facts." But which is Willy's 'hamartia'? At the beginning of Act I we notice that Willy is tired of his job routine, and then we notice his difficulty separating the past from the present, his continuous lies to his wife and to himself and his continuous search in the past for the turning point when everything went irremediably wrong, although he could not find it. Harold Bloom claims that: "Yet Willy is not destroyed by his sense of failure. [. . .] Willy is destroyed by love, by his sudden awareness that his son Biff truly loves him. Miller beautifully comments that Willy resolves to die when he is given his existence . . . his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve" (Bloom 2007, 5). Although Willy still remains misunderstood and left apart from the society and at a dramatic level he could not achieve the epiphany that leads to insights, to the moment of revelation when the hero sees himself and his situation clearly, understands what he has lost and finds the path to regenerate. His sufferings are in vain. At the very end Miller provides Biff with the insight of which Willy was incapable of: "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong. [. . .] He never knew who he was." (Salesman, 103)

### **Concluding remarks**

The play *Death of Salesman* has raised a lot of debates and criticism through the years for its themes, the place it occupies in the American Drama, its 'pathos' and impurities etc., but what has been one of the most

discussed issues of the play is its genre, some critics claim that it is a tragedy, others classify it as a 'social drama,' others consider it neither as a tragedy, nor as a social drama, but a pure Broadway production.

*Death of a Salesman* is not highly original in technique; it nevertheless contains free-verse passages, a narrator who speaks directly to the audience, fantastic and unrealistic shifts in time and an underlying web of psychological pathology. Miller devices are conventional enough to be easily grasped by the average audience, the common American man. This drama embodies the tragic archetypes and elements of a tragedy and Miller's main achievement is carving a realist character, a tragic hero, setting him in a contemporary urban society and building his play around the American Dream, he strikes deeply the consciences of the audience. Miller claims that loneliness, sufferings, anonymity, failure, consciousness and the struggle for success are embodied in the tragic sense of life in any urban society.

## **References**

Adler, Thomas P. *American Dream, 1940-1960: A Critical History*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

*1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*  
*May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo*

- Atkinson, Brooks. "Death of a Salesman, A New Drama by Arthur Miller, Has Premiere at the Morosoco." Ed. James J. Martine. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston. G. K. Hall & Co. 1979. 21-22.
- Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." Ed. Harold Bloom. *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*. New York. Chelsea House. 2007. 1- 5.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* 1969. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Dodds, E. R. "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Oedipus Rex*. Ed. Michael J. O'Brien. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968. 17- 29.
- Hamilton, Edith. *The Greek Way*. New York. W. W. Norton & Company. Inc. 1942.
- Henley, Donald. *Recent American Literature*. New York. Barron's Educational Series, Inc. 1958.
- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press Inc., 1949.
- , "The Tragedy of the Common Man." *New York Times*. 27 February, 1949: 3.
- Morgan, Frederick. "Review of Death of a Salesman." Ed. James J. Martine. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston. G. K. Hall & Co. 1979. 23.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Trans and ed. Walter Kaufman. New York: Random House Inc., 1992.
- Porter, E. Thomas. "Acres of Diamonds: Death of a Salesman." Ed. James J. Martine. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston. G. K. Hall & Co. 1979. 24- 43.
- Shattuck, Roger. *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Steinberg, M. W. "Arthur Miller and the Idea of tragedy." Ed. Robert W. Corrigan. *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969. 81-94.
- Unamuno, Miguel de. *The tragic sense of life in Men and Nations*. Trans. Anthony Kerrigan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures and Ideas*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1935.
- Williams, Raymond. "From Hero to Victim: The making of Liberal Tragedy, to Ibsen and Miller." *Modern Tragedy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. 87-105.
- ."The Realism of Arthur Miller." *Critical Quarterly*. 55 (1959): 40-49.