

Contemporary Tragic Heroes

In our own age, many critics have insisted that great tragedy can no longer be written, and they cite these reasons:

1. We lack a clear concept of moral order or fate.
2. The issue of free will is extremely clouded.
3. We have grown too democratic in our thinking to be in awe of greatness.
4. Consequently, the fall of one individual does not matter very much anymore.
5. Psychology shows us that true self-knowledge is rare.

Despite these apparent challenges, dramatists continue to strive for high tragedy on the stage. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) has attracted much critical attention in this century.

Willy Loman, Miller's hero, is, as his last name strongly suggests, a common man, not a prince or a king. He is much less clearly free than classical or Shakespearean heroes. He is conditioned by the American dream, which is that hard work will be rewarded, that success is within the grasp of anyone who plays his or her cards right and makes the right contacts. If the play does not scale the heights of tragedy, as many contend it does not, it remains at the very least the definitive critique of materialism as the force which robs human life of its dignity. Only a few ever realize the dream. Willy may not be a prince, but Miller makes him the prototype of the loser, and perhaps the loser is the someone who nowadays has most claim to our sympathies. That he has not been free to win is Miller's whole point. His play is the tragedy of the blindness induced by the American dream.

What Miller has achieved that distinguishes the play from many contemporary tragedies which stress external forces rather than character is to convince the audience of Willy's wasted potential. He is a devoted husband, and for most of his life a good provider; he tries to be a caring father. Indeed, he kills himself in a traffic accident so that his son Biff will have the insurance money to make a new start in life. We cannot view this play without believing Willy Loman deserved better than he received from life. Whether he can make free choices or not, Willy makes us care deeply about him; and in this time of rapid change, when all values are coming under question, we very often don't know *why* we should ever care, or *for whom*.

There is no recognition scene in *Death of a Salesman*, at least not by the hero about himself. This moment in classi-

cal and Shakespearean tragedies seems denied to modern dramatists. Many reasons have been given, including the influence of contemporary psychology. Ours is an age in which self-knowledge is at a premium. Perhaps, too, there is more to know about ourselves than dramatists formerly believed. Another reason is that, if we lack belief in a universal moral order, responsibility is not easy to assign. Surely a case can be made for the fact that the American way of life, capped by the American dream—and not a moral weakness in his character—was the cause of Willy Loman's catastrophe.

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Willy's wife keeps telling the audience that "attention must be paid" to her husband. Some critics, in attempting to compare *Salesman* with, say, *Oedipus* or *Lear*, argue that there is just no way for Willy to attain heroic stature. He is a small man in a big world, and this was his creator's intent. What they are saying in fact is that *modern life prevents us from developing a character important enough to be tragic*.

Others contend that playwrights have ignored the likely subjects, that there *are* suitable tragic heroes, who had both power and prominence and lost them because of a blind spot in their characters. Might not a tragedy be based on people and actions such as these?

1. Muhammad Ali, failing to recognize that he was no longer young, and insisting on one more title fight.
2. Franklin D. Roosevelt, then the most powerful man in the world, turning away from the American shore a boatload of Jewish refugees who faced certain extermination in Europe.
3. Charles Van Doren, distinguished son in a famous literary family, winning hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the admiration of a whole country, on a television quiz show, only to be exposed as having received the answers in advance.
4. King Edward VIII, having to make an anguished choice between the throne of England and marriage to an American divorcee, whose mere existence scandalized Great Britain and tore a seam in British tradition.
5. Any number of current world leaders who make crucial decisions that have devastating consequences.