

## Modern Critical Approach to Tragedy: Aspects of the Shakespearean Hero in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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### □ ABSTRACT □

This study aims to make an overall discussion of Miller's concept of the tragic hero, from a modern criticism's point of view. It also attempts to highlight his critical stance in the light of modern criticism suggesting that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were", as both fall victims for their societies, or for certain external circumstances beyond their reach, or for both.

The study draws a comprehensive comparison and contrast between the traditional tragic hero in Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and Miller's tragic hero in his *Death of a Salesman*. The study comes to the conclusion that the similarities between the two cases override the differences. Moreover, the study concludes that the tragedy of the common man in Miller's plays, according to the point of view of modern criticism, holds the same social and tragic stature in the minds of the audience and stands on equal footing with the Shakespearean or Greek tragic heroes.

**Key words:** Greek Tragedy- the common man- Shakespearean tragedy- the tragic hero- new criticism

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## مفهوم المأساة من وجهة نظر النقد الحديث: ملامح البطل الشكسبيري في مسرحية ميللر "موت بائع"

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### □ الملخص □

يعالج البحث مفهوم ميللر للبطل التراجيدي من وجهة نظر النقد الحديث؛ يُسلط البحث الضوء على هذا المفهوم من خلال وجهة نظر النقد الحديث الذي يعتبر أن الإنسان العادي يمكن أن يكون موضوعاً لقصة تراجيدية بكل ما تحويه الكلمة من معنى، كما كانت الحال بالنسبة للملوك، وذلك لكون كلتا الشخصيتين ضحية لمجتمعها، أو لظروف معينة خارجة عن إرادتها، أو لكلتا الحالتين معاً.

يجري البحث مقارنة شاملة بين مفهوم البطل التراجيدي الأرسطي، ذلك المفهوم الذي تبناه شكسبير في معظم مسرحياته، بما في ذلك "هاملت"، و"الملك لير"، ومسرحية "مكبيث"، وبطل ميللر التراجيدي، في مسرحية "موت بائع"، للتعرف على مدى التشابه والاختلاف بين كلتا الحالتين، حيث يتوصل البحث إلى نتيجة مهمة تتلخص في اعتبار نقاط التشابه بين الحالتين أكبر من نقاط الاختلاف، وأن بطل ميللر، من وجهة نظر النقد الحديث، الذي ينحدر من طبقة عامة الناس لا يقل وقعه التراجيدي في نفوس جمهور المستمعين، عن وقع البطل التراجيدي التقليدي ومكانته في مسرحيات شكسبير، أو حتى في المسرح الإغريقي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التراجيديا الإغريقية- الإنسان العادي- التراجيديا الشكسبيرية- البطل التراجيدي- النقد الجديد

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## Introduction:

Only that to me the tragedy of Willy Lowman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices. From those forests of canned goods high up near the sky, he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind, except to stare in to the mirror at a failure.<sup>1</sup>

At the **outset** of this study a careful reading into this passage may be helpful for two reasons: first, it gives us a hint about the nature of the tragic hero Miller is drawing in his *Death of a Salesman*; secondly, it paves the way, not only for the distinction between the tragic hero, and the pathetic one, but also for a probable comparison between the Shakespearean hero and that of Miller, in the sense that the former case stands for a man of high rank and nobility with flaws, and the latter one represents the tragedy of a common man. In both cases, however, there is a tragic end to the heroes, whatever the nature of this tragedy might be. This case could be traced along the lines of a long chain of historical figures, starting from Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to King Lear, and Othello to Macbeth, where the "underlying struggle to gain the rightful position"<sup>2</sup> in society is common among them all. Similarly, Willy Lowman exerts a lot of efforts to gain what he believes to be "the rightful" position in society, but because he fails to realize his ideals, he runs mad, loses his nerves, and finally takes his own life to pave the way, as he might have thought, for his family to live a better life than that he had lived.

Willy Lowman acts against the scheme of things that degrades him, against the unchangeable environment enforced upon him in a utilitarian society, where the worth of the individual is measured against his financial prosperity only. He seems to be a victim to immense forces of American capitalism, where wealth is equated with virtue, and possessions with self-worth. What brings Willy Lowman to commit suicide at the end of the play can, in part, be referred to an economic system determined by abstract principles of capitalism and utilitarianism, rather than by human needs. It was too late when he discovered this fact at his confrontation with his boss Howard: though he spends thirty four years with the Wagner company and Howard's father, Howard fires him out, confirming to him that "business is business" {II: 80}<sup>3</sup> This moment was decisive to Willy; it was a sort of epiphany, a moment of extreme clarity about the nature of the American society. He addresses Howard bitterly:

Willy: "I'm talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see- I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit!" (II: 78)

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Miller. "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday" (1950). Featured Author: Arthur Miller With News and Reviews from the Archives of The New York Times 1999. 25 May 2008, p.1. <http://partners.nytime.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller.html>

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Miller. "The Theatre of Arthur Miller: Tragedy and the Common Man". New York: Viking Press, pp 3-7. The Literary Link. 1 August 2007 <http://the-literary-link.com/Miller/html/>

<sup>3</sup> All subsequent quotations from *Death of a Salesman* are taken from the same source: Gerald Weales, ed. Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism*. (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 1977, p. 80. All numbers between parentheses in the article refer to pp. number/s, and not to line/s' numbers.

Howard's comment on Willy's position that "business is business", not only shocks Willy, but also surprises the reader, as this statement makes one think over the debased status at which the American society had arrived, morally and socially. Willy seems to accept the implication underlying Howard's statement- that the value of a person is measured against his/her actual wealth, and not against anything else; this is seen in his statement to Charley: "After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (II: 98). This leads him to commit suicide, believing that his family will benefit from his life insurance policy rather than from his continuing to live. But what makes Lowman a tragic figure is the intimation that he suffers not only from the inhumanity of a utilitarian society, but also from his inability to reconcile the hopes he had for his life with the one he has actually lived.

### Methodology:

A comparison between Willy Lowman and the historical tragic figures, such as Orestes, Medea, Macbeth and Hamlet, can be made in order to highlight all such cases, where the hero has been either displaced from his "rightful" position, as is that case with Mr. Lowman or Hamlet, or his dignity has been seriously injured. But, where does tragedy lie in these cases? In the case of Hamlet or Macbeth, for example, the tragic element lies in the flaw or crack in their characters, namely, the hesitant nature of the former, and the greed for authority of the latter. Both Hamlet and Macbeth work against the scheme of things already established by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, and Duncan's plan to name his son Malcolm heir to his throne, instead of Macbeth; both try to turn the table upside down over the heads of those who displace them, or spoil their ambitions: Hamlet, for instance, revenges himself on his uncle, Claudius, and his mother Gertrude, though he loses his life in the process of revenge. This tragic end for Hamlet raises our passions towards him. We simply sympathize with him, and feel a lot of contempt for his slayers. Ernest Johnson expresses this case in his commentary on Hamlet's dilemma:

The dilemma of Hamlet the prince and Man is to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in evil, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice ... From that dilemma of wrong feelings and right actions, he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by a proper state of mind.<sup>4</sup>

Hamlet, to "attain a proper state of mind" only after a total onslaught on the apparently stable world around him, namely, the new world created by his uncle, Claudius and mother after the assassination of Hamlet's father, King Hamlet of Denmark. He tries to restore a usurped position by reversing the course of action created by the heinous crime against his father at the hands of his uncle and his mother. This case is best expressed in Marcellus' words towards this spoiled, corrupt world around Hamlet when he says that there is "something rotten in the state of Denmark" (I: iii: 48)<sup>5</sup>, something which Hamlet prefers to set right. In the course of "Taking arms against a sea of troubles" (III: i: 81), he falls victim to an unscrupulous society, where selfishness, love of authority and ingratitude replace altruism, loyalty and gratitude. Hamlet in his first soliloquy expresses his deep frustration and dismay at his mother's betrayal of his father by accusing her of "frailty" and

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare E. Notes. 23 August 2004. E. notes. 10 October 2007, p.2.

<http://www.Enotes.Com/hamlet/>.

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. (London: Penguin books, 1994), p. 48. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

ingratitude to the memory of his father. He pours out his soul into turbulent, passionate words:

**Hamlet:**

Let me not think on't: Frailty, thy name is woman. (I: ii: 36)

As such, Hamlet's words above can be examined accordingly. He speaks these lines after enduring the unpleasant scene at Claudius and Gertrude's court; he describes the haste of their marriage, commenting bitterly at his mother's attitude towards his dead father that the shoes she wore to his father's funeral were not worn out before her marriage to Claudius. Proceeding from this attitude, he expresses his deep disappointment towards women; as he runs through his description of their marriage, he compares Claudius to his father, noting that his father was "so excellent a king", while Claudius is a bestial "satyr" (I: ii: 35). Each of these motifs recurs throughout the play marking the courses which drive Hamlet to revenge himself upon Claudius and Gertrude, and consequently to die a tragic death. If we come to agree upon Arthur Miller's suggestion that the tragic position is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. Then, what makes this position more severe is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens- and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. In no way is the common man debarred from such thoughts, or such actions.<sup>6</sup>

**Objectives:**

In this sense, the tragedy of Willy Lowman becomes equal to the tragedy of Hamlet and Macbeth, King Lear and Medea. Each of the above mentioned figures are considered to be tragic, because all of them feel that they were placed compulsorily in the wrong position; they want to attain their rightful positions by reversing the scheme of things, which led them to such an end. Seen in this light, the tragic status of Willy Lowman can be regarded as equal to that of Hamlet or Medea, apart from the rank or nobility of the tragic hero. Willy Lowman, in this sense, becomes "Miller's Everyman who undergoes a disintegration of personality which the playwright attributes to the brutalities of the acquisitive American society"<sup>7</sup> and from Hamlet to Macbeth, we find the same dilemma facing such tragic heroes, the dilemma of a sort of a disintegration of personality attributed to mistreatment of society to them, or underestimation of their social status: "Miller's *Everyman*, undergoes a disintegration of personality", as "he had the wrong dreams is his diagnosis of Willy, who moves in a state of trauma between a shabby present and a guilt ridden past."<sup>8</sup> In this respect *Death of a Salesman* can be viewed as a genuine tragedy: it "refused admission to its author's opinions"<sup>9</sup>, opening itself to the fact that this particular kind of tragedy is about a man who "has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others; it is the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live."<sup>10</sup> Willy seems to sacrifice his life for a cause relating to hoping a better life for his family. Thus, again his death seems to

<sup>6</sup> For further details on the concept of the "tragic right", see *Featured Author*, op. cit, 2-5.

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Craik, ed. *The Revels History of Drama in English* by Travis B. R. Moody and Walter J. Meserve: (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1977), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 168.

be an assertion of bravery, an assertion of the status of a hero who does not fear death if there is a cause to die for, an honorable social status to preserve, or a failure to atone for. Willy's case thus is tantamount to that of great tragic heroes, such as Hamlet, Medea and Orstes, who fight courageously for a cause and die a tragically honorable death. Hamlet's case is the most expressive, in this sense, of Willy's case, whose life outlines a long list of the miseries of experience, ranging from hard work to political oppression and lovesickness, as is the case to Hamlet, a state which is most obviously expressed in his famous soliloquy in Act III, Scene i. He pours his soul out in this soliloquy, touching at the most sensitive in Man's life: life and death, death in the way Willy lost his life, or death in the way Hamlet thinks of losing his life, that is, suicide.

Hamlet's mental status at this stage in the play appears to be greatly similar to that of Willy before he commits suicide: both think of death to escape from a certain social reality disturbing their social existence. In the case of Hamlet, his father's ambiguous death, and his doubts about his uncle's and mother's involvement in the killing, causes Hamlet to lose his mental stability and think of suicide to end the pain of life. He outlines a long list of the miseries of experience, ranging from hard work to political oppression; Hamlet's case here seems to be similar to that of Willy Lowman, that is, both of them may be held to be pathetic figures rather than tragic heroes: Hamlet's tragically hesitant nature, and his inability to take a decision towards what to do with his life, or what to do against his uncle, Claudius, and his mother Gertrude, brings him much closer to the state of a pathetic hero. At first, we sympathize a lot with his case as a victim of an unscrupulous uncle and an incestuous mother, and greatly appreciate his valor to confront their tragedy; it was not too long until we start to pity his case rather than to sympathize with him, especially when he starts to waver between whether "to be, or not to be", or between "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles" (III: ii: 81). His case of a pathetic hero crystallizes clearly when he starts to fluctuate more about how to act against what he considers an outrageous or a heinous act; he could not decide on whether to die or to remain alive; "to die" in order to "end the heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks/ that flesh is heir to"; or to stay alive for fear of the unknown after death: "The dread of something after death/, The undiscovered country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns" (III: ii: 81). This decline in our emotions towards Hamlet's tragic status brings us again to Willy's tragic dimension that led us to start this study: Hamlet suffers from the inhumanity of a selfish enterprise conducted by selfish close relatives. Similarly, Willy suffers not only from the inhumanity of "free enterprise, but also from his inability to reconcile the lapses he had for his life with the one he has actually lived."<sup>11</sup>

Willy Lowman, as such, seems to be, not only shutting himself off from his family members, but also from other groups in society. He builds for himself an idealistic world, a world of unachievable utopian values and principles, isolating himself from "the machine civilization", which deprives people their humanity. Thus, Willy seems, as Miller himself comments during the course of a symposium on *Death of a Salesman*, to be seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life, which machine-civilization deprives people of<sup>12</sup>; and most probably "looking for his self-hood, for his immortal soul, away from a society where the value of man is 'quantified' only 'according to actual wealth or earning potential.'<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Willy decides to commit suicide, believing that his worth as a dead man

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Miller. Penguin Reading Guides. *Death of a Salesman*. 1st August 2007, p. 2.  
<http://us.penguin-group.com/static/guides/us/death-of-a-salesman-GBF.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

could be more than being alive; he tells Charley, "You end up worth more dead than being alive" (II: 98).

Hamlet, in comparison to Willy, looks for his "self-hood", for his immortal soul", to borrow Miller's words, away from a corrupt monarchy, where forces of treachery and deception have no role to play. In this way, the play appears to be like, *Death of a Salesman*, more than an indictment of a corrupt political system of the state of Denmark, to give Hamlet a truly tragic dimension in his search for truth about his late father's ambiguous tragic death: he loses his life on the way, looking for truth. It is a great sacrifice that he makes for the sake of discovering the reasons behind his father's death. Here, Hamlet speaks for most Shakespearean tragic heroes, starting from Othello and ending up with Julius Caesar, in the sense that all "tragic heroes seek something more basic and intangible: an assertion of their own identities, in which their destinies, and their relations with other people are all bound up."<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, Hamlet's tragic stature, like that of the Willy Lowman, Othello, Oedipus and Julius Caesar, comes not from his place in society only, but also from the intensity of his living, the motives of his soul, the human potential he carries in his mind, and the affirmation of manhood in the face of destruction.<sup>15</sup> Judah Bierman contends in this concern that Willy Lowman may be even compared to the status of

### Oedipus:

Like Oedipus, Willy doesn't know who his father is or who his children are. But unlike Oedipus, who has the strength to discover the truth, as well as the strength to destroy himself, he has only the weakness of his ignorance. His self-destruction is not, like Othello's, an atonement and redress of balance by a figure who emerges from his torture with dearly bought wisdom; it is the despairing, ill-considered act of maturity.<sup>16</sup>

Seen in this light, the case of Lowman may be compared to that of the great Greek tragic hero, defined by Aristotle as "the sort of man who is not conspicuously virtuous or just and whose decline into misery is not caused by vice and depravity, but rather by some flaw or error;"<sup>17</sup> or to those of Shakespeare, in the sense that "the commonest of men may take on the tragic stature which is spuriously attached to the royal or the highborn in our minds".<sup>18</sup> Willy's problem, then, resides in his own values and the non-realistic world in which he lives, an "error or a flaw" in his character that is comparable to that flaw in a Greek character, like Oedipus and Thyestes.<sup>19</sup>

Willy's crisis thus lies in his inability to understand the present and the past alike. His major failure lies in his inability to make use of the experiences of the past to improve on the opportunities available to his family members. It seems that he recalls only those ideas, memories that appeal to him and ignores those events that do not serve his illusions. For example, he ignores Bernard's warnings about Biff's math grades, "and chooses to sublimate those details in his dreams of Biff. Similarly, he recalls Ben's fondness of brutal

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Leggatt. *English Drama: Shakespeare to the Restoration 1590-1660*. (London: Longman, 1988), p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> For further illustration of this point, see *Death of A Salesman: Text and Criticism*, pp. 265 -71.

<sup>16</sup> *Death of a Salesman*, op. cit., 271.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Richard Dutton in his *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. (London: Longman, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Death of a Salesman*, op. cit., 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

acts, "but he chooses to incorporate only Ben's high-sounding phrases when picturing him as a successful businessman. It is not so much what has happened to Willy as what he has chosen to make of those events that push him toward self-destruction."<sup>20</sup>

Hence, Lowman's suicide at the end of the play may refer indirectly to the general failure of the American dream at large. Lowman is one of the victims of the major American dream: he finds himself caught up between two fires, the fire of living up to his dreams and convictions, and the fire of his shortcomings that were mostly behind his failure. He failed to fill up the financial gaps created by a utilitarian, capitalist society, so he falls victim to "the survival-of-fittest business philosophy taking hold in America."<sup>21</sup> Biff seems to arrive at the same conclusion when he dispels his father's idea that the Lowman's family is special. Biff asserts, "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" This declaration angers Willy, who replies, "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Lowman, and you are Biff Lowman!" (II: 132). Biff does not seem to doubt his father's reply when his father reasserts that he is not "a leader of men", neither his father, who he takes to be a mere "hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!", referring probably here to the majority of American middle-businessmen, who failed to achieve their dreams in a money-minded society. The application of Lowman's tragedy to all common men falling into his line of business, or social status is, thus, what invites us to say that *Death of a Salesman* is a drama of the tragedy and pathos of a common man, who equates in his tragic stature the classical Greek or Elizabethan tragic hero, for the ancient Greeks, at least for Aristotle, pathos was the destructive or painful act in tragedy. A character like Oedipus, for example, had to go through a series of hardships and problems to reach the status of a tragic hero: he had to lead the life of an outcast at infancy, and to live away from his homeland for a fairly long time, before he finally comes back to Athens to face his doom. He finds out that the prophecy of the Sphinx came true about killing his father and marrying his mother- incidents in his life which he had nothing to do with.

So, the tragic fall at the end of the play is so resounding, because the element of pathos is there in all the incidents leading up to his down-fall. Similarly, Willy's death has been considered pathetic rather than tragic; he was a victim, like Oedipus, to external powers represented by a system of ruthless composition that has no place for unproductive persons. Both Oedipus and Willy draw the spectators' and the readers' sympathy, due to their helplessness in resisting the powers, whether supernatural, as is the case with, that drive them forcibly to a tragic suicide.

Hence the pathetic case of Willy arises to the tragic case of Oedipus: the element of "pathos", which was an essential element in Greek tragedy, raises the level of the concerned heroes to that of great tragic heroes, who stand for humanity at large, no matter what was the nature of the hero- a common or a noble man. The same criterion can be applied to other tragic figures in the Elizabethan and Greek periods, such as Macbeth, Lear, Hamlet, Medea or Orestes, "is that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society"<sup>22</sup>, and to resist external ruthless powers driving him forcibly towards tragic downfall; their case, consequently, becomes universal, applicable to the common man, apart from his rank or nobility of the tragic hero. These heroes, as C. W. E. Bigsby argues, live in "a World in which the relationship between man and environment

<sup>20</sup> Irving Deer & Harriet A. Deer. Eds. *Selves in Perspective*. (New York: Harcourt, 1975), p. 415.

<sup>21</sup> Micheal J. Cummings. "Death of a Salesman: A Critical Survey." *Cummings Study Guides*. 2003. 4 December 2007, p. 2.<<http://www.CummingStudyGuides.net/Deathof.html>>

<sup>22</sup> Weales, *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism*, p. 144.

had been destroyed", due to "a sense of alienation, bred by social injustice";<sup>23</sup> similar characters were presented in the works of Tennessee Williams, Kingsly, Elmer Rice and O'Neil. Miller himself in his "Death of a salesman: Tragedy and the Common Man" also refers to the quality that makes such heroes universal tragic figures equal in their tragic stature to Shakespearean or Greek heroes: he finds such an element in "the underlying fear" about those who were displaced in a world that hardly bears any respect for the socially degraded or debased individuals.<sup>24</sup> This case is very much applicable to Willy Lowman, who tries hard to fit himself into the mould of a society to which he does not factually belong. He exhausts himself running after a mirage that he is a successful, "well-liked" salesman, a conception he fails to fulfill, as Biff himself admits:

Biff: They've laughed at Dad for years, and you know why? Because we don't belong in this nut house of a city! We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or-or carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle! (I: 61).

Such a fear of being displaced in an unscrupulous society drives him to commit suicide at the end of the play, believing that such an act may save his children the pains of venturing into "a world that is not home" for the weak, as Miller himself puts it, "nor even an open battle-ground, but only galaxies of high promise over a fear of *falling*".<sup>25</sup> Willy's problem, then, resides in his own mind and the nonrealistic, fragmented world in which he lives: "A World in which values are uncertain and the individual has to construct artificially a sense of his own identity"<sup>26</sup> - conditions that are basic not only to the construction of the world of Miller's tragic hero, but also to the construction of Shakespearean tragedy. In other words, Hamlet's dilemma lies in his fervent pursuit to ascertain himself as a noble man of principles in a world full of treachery, deception and ingratitude. So, Hamlet, "pursuing an 'ethically justified revenge'", due to Claudius' and Gertrude's treachery, "is not in the tragic situation which yields the greatest intensity".<sup>27</sup>

This brings him closer to the tragic situation of Willy Lowman, whose fall-down becomes utterly subjective, and his conflict becomes, like Hamlet's situation, mainly a matter of personality: "he eventually perishes", as Hegel puts it, "owing to his own hesitation and a complication of external circumstances."<sup>28</sup> The only difference between Willy and Hamlet on the one hand, as tragic heroes, and their Greek counterparts, is that, as Hegel points out, the tragedy of Hamlet and along with him, in comparison, Willy, "lacks the weightiness which belongs to the tragedy of equally valid claims", because "it lacks a catastrophe which satisfies the audience as inevitable and ultimately just".<sup>29</sup> So, the tragedy of Lowman and Hamlet, Medea and Orestes, according to the New Criticism's approach, might be said to be not only universal, but also a common man's tragedy, concordant with the Aristotelian criteria of the tragic hero "who morally stands midway between two extremes", a man who "is not eminently good or just, though he

<sup>23</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby. *A Critical Introduction to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Drama*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Weales, *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism*, p. 145.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by W. B. Dillingham in his "Arthur Miller and the Loss of Conscience" in *Death of a salesman: Text and Criticism*, p. 343.

<sup>26</sup> *English Drama*, op. cit. p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> Dyson, *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism*, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

leans to the side of goodness."<sup>30</sup> This manifests Hamlet's concept of nobility of Man, and not of a particular man, frailty of all women, and not of Gertrude, and the habit of "jigging and ambling" of all women and not of Ophelia only (III: ii: 83). Hence we can conclude that Shakespeare could make his tragedies address universal issues rather than individual cases. This is what drives us to consider his tragedy as "modern", in the Millerean sense, "to the extent that it seems to dramatize the terrible revelation of a secular and arbitrary world, a purposeless universe of suffering and death",<sup>31</sup> where the case of the tragedy of the common man becomes exemplary.

### Conclusion:

Hamlet's ideas above "set the generalized pitch, designating existence as a non-actualized entity",<sup>32</sup> and shows "the relation of the tragic hero, as individual, to the 'ethical substance'", that makes his case a universal one.<sup>33</sup> Hamlet's search for the truth about the death of his father, by the indirect interrogation of his mother, or through his feigning of madness and continual watching of his uncle's movement, lead ultimately to self-knowledge. He starts to discover not only the reality of the treacherous world around him, but also the realities of the people who aimed to bereave him of his due privileges as the prince of Denmark. This is a true realization of the Self and the World around him to revenge himself upon all representatives of this corrupt world, namely, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Laertes. Hamlet enters forcibly into the world in the final act of the play, by a trick prepared by his uncle, to lose his life on the altar of a world void of values. Similarly, Willy Lowman leads a life in a world of no values, a world where the utmost significance is given to material gains only, a kind of revelation that brings about his suicide at the end of the play.

Hamlet and Lowman become tragic heroes, because they fight for self-recognition, for gaining "a rightful position in their societies; both lose their lives when they come face to face with the verities of the world around them: the former's soul is shed directly at the hands of a brutal uncle (a symbol for a corrupt royal society), while the latter's soul is wasted indirectly at the hands of a brutal, merciless materialist society. Both stand for the tragedy of the common man at large, who seeks to wreak revenge on those who had bereaved him the 'rightful' position in society, or usurped his rights inherent in him. Thus, tragic heroes whether noble characters or common men outline a long list of the miseries of experience, ranging from hard work to social failure, and from political oppression to ingratitude. In this way, Hamlet's and Lowman's central moral dilemmas transcend their periods, making them universal figures, who reflect the tragedy of the common man in general. Hence, death for Hamlet, as a tragic hero, seems to be closely associated with the concept of spirituality, truth, and uncertainty: death may bring the answers to Hamlet's deepest questions about truth in an ambiguous world, a world that indicts Lowman with suffering and pain, driving him forcibly to death; in other words, he fails to find the convincing answers to his dilemma in an unscrupulous world; he fails to reconcile his hopes and dreams with the world he had actually lived. As Lowman fails, like Hamlet, to

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. (New Delhi: Kalyani Press, 1987), p. 304.

<sup>31</sup> Arnold Bennett, and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. (London: Prentice hall, 1995), p. 106.

<sup>32</sup> Tzachi Zamir. *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> Murray Krieger. *Theory of Criticism*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 55.

bear the disparity between his dreams and the life he has lived, he drifts almost entirely towards living within his imagination.

It is a kind of escape into their own worlds, looking for their "selfhood", for their "immortal soul", and "for tremendously powerful ideals", as Miller puts it.<sup>34</sup> To implement these ideals, they pay their souls, raising themselves to the level of great worthy men who "end up worth more dead", as Lowman puts it to Charley, "than alive" (II: 98).

• **Note:** Modern criticism's approach to the concept of the tragic hero is different from the classical viewpoint: classical criticism lays down certain criteria against which the tragic hero is measured; for instance, he should belong to the ruling class; he should have a flaw in his character to bring about his downfall; and his downfall must arouse pity and fear in the audience etc. According to modern criticism's point of view, including the deconstructive, structuralist or post-structuralist approach, the tragic hero does not necessarily have a flaw in his character, or should not necessarily be one of the ruling class, as he is "as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were": both fall victims for their societies, for certain external circumstances beyond their reach. This view here is a derivation from a deconstructive approach that rejects to reduce terms (such as tragedy, comedy, essence, substance, being, truth etc.) to any ultimate or definitive meaning adopted traditionally in literature or philosophy. In contrast, it subverts the classical concept of tragedy in general and the tragic hero in particular by replacing it by a new concept as explained in details in the article.

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<sup>34</sup> See Miller's symposium on *Death of A Salesman* delivered in 1958, *Featured Author*, p. 4.

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