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# RETHINKING TRAGIC HEROISM IN MODERN DRAMA: THE COMMON MAN TRAGEDY OF ARTHUR MILLER

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## Abstract

The article studies Arthur Miller's groundbreaking idea of the tragic hero and the way he portrays the "common man," a sort of man able to deliver profound tragedy. With a focus largely on *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and Miller's essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, it resists the Aristotelian vision limiting tragedy to nobility. These psychological, ethical, and social pressures placed on Willy Loman and John Proctor reveal in the process the manner that tragedy today finds expression from the everyday and social imperatives. This study focuses on the crucial process through which Miller democratized tragedy to deepen literary discussions about heroism in our era.

**Keywords:** Arthur Miller, the common man, contemporary tragedy, moral dilemma, social expectations.

## I. Introduction

Tragedy itself, as understood by Aristotle in the classical period, was primarily the land of nobility: it was the realm of noble characters whose ruinous path led to catharsis. The tragic hero in classical definition was distinguished by social rank and fatal flaw. A decade later, though, came the twentieth-century drama, which went beyond those standard forms and put common people front and center in tragic narratives. Arthur Miller himself was successful in espousing this transformation. In his 1949 essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," he posits that the capacity for tragedy, while not exclusive to the elite, is an essential attribute of common people. In this discourse, I examine why Miller's plays, (1) *Death of*



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a Salesman and (2) The Crucible, are cases in point—providing the socio-moral/psychological struggles of the protagonists that allow ordinary lives to express tragic complexity.

## **2.Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Classical Tragedy and Aristotelian Approaches**

Aristotle's Poetics formally defined the tragic hero as an individual of noble status, whose hamartia in their end is tragic devastation, with much ethical and social import. But that their doom, on a grand scale that characters like Oedipus and Macbeth are so much better at grasping than the tragic hero, was enough to unleash an emotional purge in viewers.

### **2.2 Where tragedy came from: “The Ordinary Men”**

Realism and psychoanalysis in the 20th century expanded the topics of tragedy to people on average. Tale stories had begun to focus more on personal choice, inner psychological conflicts and society's condemnation rather than predestined fate.

### **2.3 Miller's Contribution**

Miller completely rejected the aristocratic exclusive form of tragedy for, as he used to refer to the nobility, tragedy was about the internal struggle for dignity, not the family legacy. Heroic tragedy has the same opportunity for the “common man,” he argues, because the common life is rooted in the dignity of the struggle against hardship and self-examination that it instills.

## **3.The Tragic Dimensions of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman**

### **3.1 Societal and Psychological Burdens**

Willy Loman represents the destructive forces of the American Dream and social idealization of success. The gulf between his goals and his lived reality is only widening with his desire to fulfill that which he thinks is unattainable.



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### **3.2 Inner Conflict and Denial**

Willy's unraveling is made worse by his refusal to admit to his limitations. His ongoing deceit, this yearning for an idealized sense of self which can provoke unbearable psychological turmoil, is a major way Miller demonstrates his thematic preoccupation with inner struggles as central to tragedy.

### **3.3 Ethics and Termination of Death**

Despite his foibles, Willy does his best to keep his family respected. His final suicide symbolizes his tragic futile quest for meaning and identity when he considers it as a guarantee of financial security offered via life insurance, and is an icon for both the virtue of noble duty and the importance of devotion to family and self-worth.

## **4. John Proctor in The Crucible: Upholding Integrity Amidst Social Turmoil**

### **4.1 Social Oppression and Mass Hysteria**

In the context of the Salem witch trials, Proctor struggles against general social cruelty and widespread paranoia. His confrontation with false accusations symbolizes the perils of collective fear and coercive conformity.

### **4.2 Ethical Strain**

Proctor has a terrible choice to make in his life: to live by telling some lie or die a real man to the test. His stand on his principles is the scaffolding for the moral questions asked today in dramatic, modern tragedy.

### **4.3 Redefining Heroism**

Proctor's self-assured integrity serves to make clear how Miller's analysis is that we can only establish the meaning there must derive from a conviction of one's integrity and moral fortitude than from class privilege. There Miller stresses, rather, tragic greatness in average citizens.



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## **5. Analysis: Characteristics of Modern Tragic Heroes**

### **5.1 Psychological Depth**

In Miller's characters' minds, everything lies on a very complex emotional line. Such psychological honesty not only gives an important historical and poetic twist to this form of tragedy but it also helps us see human nature directly in view within the mundane scenes of everyday living.

### **5.2 Social Commentary**

Both plays are sites of social commentary: *Death of a Salesman* critiques capitalist ideals of the American Dream; *The Crucible* looks afresh into the dangers of immutable morality and herd morality. Miller makes the dynamics between social groups an integral aspect of his tragic nature.

### **5.3 Ethical Consideration**

The protagonists are also embroiled in internal conflicts navigating the tension of self-interest and ethics, reflecting universal human disputes. They write about ethical dilemmas and the courage it takes, setting tragedy apart from the constraints of the aristocracy.

## **Conclusion**

Arthur Miller transforms the tragic hero, putting his tragic narrative front-and-center within the consciousness of ordinary people. Miller employs Willy Loman and John Proctor to show the shared pressures of society, moral crisis and psychological conflict that construct tragedy. It is the democratizing of tragedy, at least in part, that speaks of the depth and dignity of human struggle — and not the social rank — that makes for heroic tragedy. Miller's work, in that sense, is part of the writing of the new generation, and it offers an enduring lesson in whether any humanity has ever had to suffer with the pain of loss or endure a moral decision.

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