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American Tragedians: O'Neill, Williams, Miller

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Willy Loman - A Tragic Hero?

Introduction

When Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman was first launched on Broadway in 1949, it had a run of nearly two years. Rather similar to its predecessor, All my Sons (1947), inasmuch as it, too, is a family play that bases on a father-son-relationship or rather -conflict and concentrates on the close interrelation between sociological and psychological problems, it is yet quite different in many an aspect that might explain the later play's much more enthusiastic acclaim. The aspect that looms highest among others is the difference in the social position of the two respective protagonists, Joe Keller and Willy Loman, the former a self-made man who indirectly causes the death of his son Larry, the latter on the other side of the decision-making level, a nobody (a low man) who nearly completely destroys the life of his favourite son Biff. Both commit suicide in the end, but their reasons for doing so are completely different, and I think it is the difference in the sympathy they gain that accounts for their different acceptance by the audience of post-war USA.

Both deaths are tragic, by all standards. Joe Keller certainly did not intend to kill his own son, a pilot, when he delivered corrupt machinery to the US Air Force; nor did Willy ever want to destroy Biff's life by blowing him up with the wrong ideals or bringing him down when allowing himself to be discovered with a woman in a hotel room. Both decide to pay for their mistakes, their character flaws, with their lives. But whereas Joe's death is some sort of repentance for his mistake - a self-containing act, so to speak - Willy kills himself for

the benefit of others. The former dies to pay, the latter to be paid - a large sum of insurance money to get his family under way.

And even in their moments of *anagnorisis*, of recognition, they differ considerably. Joe Keller is now clearly aware of what he has done wrong. Willy Loman never sees what has caused his life to be a failure. Blindly and happily he smashes his car and himself, hoping to be at last good for something. He dies accepting a guilt that is not even his. Thus Joe Keller is much like King Oedipus, the famous King of Thebes that arrogantly denies all participation in the killing of his father until finally denial is no longer possible. There is a difference, of course, inasmuch as Joe Keller knows what he is doing when he delivers damaged spare parts, but essentially their reactions are the same: they punish themselves. And the audience is supposed to feel sympathy with them, learn from them - both of which reactions I can understand but not fully follow through, meaning I am not half as touched as when I watch Willy Loman struggling to get things straight. For all I know, he is a real tragic hero, but then, the question remains whether tragic heroes by definition are still possible in our times.

Miller and the Idea of Tragedy

Trying to find a definition of what tragedy is, one might say that it is a serious play or drama typically dealing with the problems of a central character, leading to an unhappy or disastrous ending brought about, as in ancient drama, by fate and a tragic flaw in this character, or, in modern drama, usually by moral weakness, psychological maladjustment, or social pressures. At least the three characters mentioned above might well be summed up by this attempt at a definition. There is Oedipus misguided by the gods into killing his father and marrying his mother, but guided by his irascibility and arrogance; there is Joe Keller guided - or misled - by his moral weakness; and there is Willy Loman pushed forward by imagined or real social pressures that seem to forbid his soul's adjustment to the society he lives in. By nearly all standards, he is not a hero. He is not a king before whose example we stand in awe;

he is not a modern times tycoon before who, if not by his moral values, but by his social and economic achievements we stand impressed. In both these cases the characters to a large extent determine their lives, their fate. Both, in fact, know from the beginning. Oedipus is warned by a seer, whose accusation he dismisses as outrageous. And Joe Keller knows very well that he is sinning when he delivers his improper cargo and even allows his partner to be imprisoned for charges he himself is also responsible for.

Willy Loman knows nothing for sure. He is constantly on the lookout for recipes to structure his life. But let there be no mistaking: He does feel like a king, the king in the house. He is domineering, in the most basic understanding of the word. And as such he is most probably very much alike to hundreds of other characters in the world who would - as two years of theatre-goers have done on Broadway - only gladly identify with at least that part of his character. Or as the audience of one state prison in the US who is said to have completely been carried away by the play and its central character. For the latter, Willy Loman seems to have been the tragic hero of old, the character that is deceived by superior forces and punished for something he is not essentially responsible for. And this seems to have been the idea Miller was trying to prove: that it is still possible to create tragic heroes in our times.

Well, why not, one might ask. To answer this question, one must throw a glance on the development of classical tragedy as taken over from Greece and revived throughout Europe in the age of the Renaissance. Germany saw - as a step down from the royal level - its *Bürgerliches Trauerspiel* in Lessing's Emilia Gallotti, and later its lower-lower class tragedy in Hauptmann's Die Weber. A similar development is not traceable in the US. On the contrary. As late as 1931 Eugene O'Neil, in Mourning becomes Electra, tries to find out if the Greek tragic elements are still valid in modern times. Only two years before J. W. Krutch had, in his essay The Tragic Fallacy, objected to the use of the term "tragedy" in relation to contemporary drama, arguing that tragedy presupposed belief in man, in his greatness and the

possibility of his triumph in his struggle against the calamities of life. The Great Depression of 1929 seems to have proved him right. Miller, however, though greatly influenced by this year and its aftermaths, which had brought the Miller family to the brink of ruin, takes fatal blow as a challenge, outlining in his essay Tragedy and the Common Man a tragedy that is to be wholly dominated by the protagonist's heroic struggle for self-realization and a tremendous zeal for individual freedom. Trying to achieve these aims, the tragic hero will inevitably get into conflict with society. But his attack or reactions on all kinds of oppression and injustice will in the end lead to setting up new standards of behaviour and to the discovery of an underlying moral law.

Willy Loman - a tragic hero?

At first sight, Willy has nothing heroic about him. When he first appears, he is already past sixty, tired to the death, trying to stand up to the weight of his sample cases with his sore palms. His first utterance is a word-sigh that carries all his exhaustion. The house which he returns to has nothing of the proverbial castle, either. It looks fragile, bathed in serene blue light, standing out as a last resort against towering angular shapes of skyscrapers invading the area, already penetrating the house, as is indicated by the house's two-dimensional rooflines through which the apartment blocks shine in an angry and aggressive orange. Willy is at the end of his tether, apparently not capable of standing up against anything fortune might have in stock for him, and certainly not awe-inspiring at all.

But then, I ask: Is this little man in his plight not much more apt to be the hero in a tragedy? Smitten down to the ground at the very beginning, who but he has the best chances to stand up and fight whatever has brought him down? A great man is somehow expected to achieve such a task, what with all the resources he usually can count on. And with the gods or supernatural forces gone these days, man himself has become the measure of all things again. Thus a great man has really nobody against him but himself. And to overcome oneself and be

even greater than one already is can hardly be considered an awe-inspiring deed, a deed that may win all our admiration, all our sympathy, all our pathos.

Curiously enough, this is exactly what Willy Loman is after. He is facing the shambles of his life, professionally a failure who is laughed at behind his back and economically constantly in a race with the junkyard. And as for his social and family life, those things “which should accompany old age, as honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” (Shakespeare 72) Willy cannot look upon. He has not been able to accumulate honour by deeds of daring, deeds that he wanted to do in his younger life, deeds that he even had the chance to accomplish when he was asked by his brother Ben to follow him into the jungle. Obedience he once had, his boys following his words and orders like young dogs, until that day when Biff spotted him with a another woman in a hotel room. Now it is only fight and spite, with the two boys completely adrift. And the only friend that seems to be left is his neighbour Charley who sustains him with some weekly money and every once in a while appears to cheer him up a bit, though not very successfully. Love, then, seems to be the only possibility left to accompany his old age. There is Linda, it is true, who is said to more than love him, to admire him. Whatever it is, she never does anything to help him overcome his all-time low; on the contrary, she accepts his lies as to his selling successes, and she even hushes up his attempts at suicide.

I think it is just this mixing up of love and admiration that has sunk Willy into his deep depression. He had always wanted to be admired, to be well-liked, as he expresses it himself time after time. And to reach this goal he had given himself to boasting and bragging, in particular to his sons, until one day they came off age, the one, Happy, facing the same difficulties in his professional life as Willy must have faced them at the beginning of his career and accepting his life along the very same lines of showing off, the other, Biff, breaking when detecting his father’s adultery and ever since roaming the country in order to

find a new, a moral intact identity. And Willy has not learnt from all this. He continues pushing his sons into positions of admiration, into positions passed down to him from his brother Ben. It is he who represents the sharpest distinction between love and admiration. Willy admires him for his successful career, not noticing what it probably takes to be that successful. And behind the figure of Ben there looms, of course, Miller's main canvas to sketch Willy upon: the American Dream, a dream so powerful as to shoot astronauts onto the moon only twenty years later - an admirable deed, indeed. Miller, however, thinks that such a dream can also be very misleading. Progress at all costs, success at all costs, unfair fighting going without saying. Ben constantly compares this new setting with a jungle in which only the fittest survive. Nothing of love, but admiration for the winners.

Such a winner is, for example, Dave Singleman, the salesman who in his green velvet slippers drums merchandise in thirty-one states by picking up a telephone receiver in a hotel room. But as the name already indicates, he is rather singular in his achievement. This symbolic figure means even more to Willy than his brother Ben. He is particularly impressed by the fact that you could just enter a hotel room and pick up a phone and be "remembered and loved and helped by so many different people" (Miller 58). But in his heart there also remains the picture of his brother who went into the jungle at the age of seventeen and came back rich four years later. And on the basis of these ideals he tries to educate his sons, with a special attention to Biff, who seems to have all the qualities of a winner. Biff is, so to speak, the crucible for Willy's ideals, and when he drops out after detecting his father to be a fake, the world tumbles down on Willy. Biff has, as it were, detected the tragic flaw of his father.

Willy's tragic flaw

"For Miller," says Gerald Weales, "Willy's tragedy lies in the fact that he had an alternative that he did not take, that having chosen the wrong star he reached for it until he died of stretching." (Weales, in Bloom 6) But although Biff corroborates this idea when he

says that they “don’t belong in this nuthouse of a city” (Miller 43), I personally don’t think that this was Miller’s idea of tragic Willy. I prefer to think that Willy would have saved in any of these surroundings, just as his son Biff fails both at the city school and when he tours the country and ends up in jail. I rather agree with John Gassner when he points out that the “tragic hero makes *himself* tragic - by his struggle and suffering.” (Gassner, in Bloom 7) This presupposes that it suffices to be a human being to be a hero, too. Anybody can be a hero - not in absolute terms, but in relative terms, the particular circumstances being the metre by which he is measured. Willy does not see this relative embedment, although he is advised by Linda asking him: “Why must everybody conquer the world?” (Miller 61) He, just like Ben, wants to be founded on something solid, on something he can lay his hands on, he can show off with, he can be admired for. The silver athletic trophy in his bedroom well represents the two-sidedness of this concept: the moment you win it is the moment you lose it. A practical example of this same concept is when Charley fires him because he hasn’t been successful enough to represent the firm any longer, in spite of real or imaginary successes in the past. Willy believes that one single success will count for life, just like the Macbeths believed that removing Duncan would set them up in glory for ever and ever. But we know that Macbeth stood warned by Banquo who knew that “the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence.” (Shakespeare 8)

The quotation is extremely applicable to what is going on in Willy’s world as well. The Great Depression had shown Miller that there are forces behind man’s strife for happiness that would not be controlled; that there are truths in the belief of man’s progress, but no general truth; that many a man is won over by silver trophies or green velvet slippers or jungle riches, all by themselves honest enough, but as many a man betrayed by these trifles in deepest consequence. And just like Macbeth, Willy is driven by an insatiable ambition to turn out number one man. He does not, it is true, dispose of the same resources that a Macbeth

has. But his misinterpretation of life is very much the same. It is his tragic flaw to have fallen for the ideal of turning out number one without ever understanding how to reach that. The instruments of darkness have told him that it is possible, but they have left the way there open for Willy to decide.

In this context it should be noticed that Miller does not present these instruments of darkness in a black and white resolution. Willy's boss Howard is a family man, he shows a lot of understanding towards Willy, he is respectful towards him as far as possible. But since Willy seems to be proving to become a handicap for his firm, he has to give him the sack. And the other representative of moderate success, Charley, is portrayed as nearly more than humane, what with covering up Willy's expenses for we do not know how many months and years. This is, by the way, not intended to cover the fact that essentially they are both uninterested in Willy's fate. In the back of their minds they know what Bernard once expresses in words when referring to Biff: "He never trained himself for anything." (Miller 66) Bernard, as a matter of fact, seems to me the perfect example of how Miller sees the counterpart to Willy's life. He is going to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court and does not even mention it. Willy would have based ten lives on such an achievement.

Willy's tragic flaw, then, is falling for these honest trifles the instruments of darkness win us over with. And although a small, a little man, he falls into the same category as a Macbeth. His struggle to overcome his failure makes him tragic. He is as blind as Oedipus, who is, paradoxically so, warned by a blind seer. Both share the same arrogance, the same pride. A pride that makes him refuse Charley's continuous offers of a job. Willy would never succumb under the yoke of the modern business world that seems to have accepted that man no longer is the measure of all things, but that there are these instruments of darkness designing a scene into which one has to integrate, even though it might cost your personal identity; in which man ranks on the level of a deposit bottle that, once it is broken, "you don't

get your nickel back” (Miller 30). No wonder he is just fired by Howard the moment he no longer runs up to expectations.

The other side of the coin

Nonetheless it should not be overlooked that as a traditional tragic figure Willy does not come up to standards. As Henry Popkin once put it, “Willy is drab and average; the surest guarantee of his drabness is in his commitment to the standard ideals, the standard commercial products, ... he believes ... that success is the reward of making friends and influencing people - being impressive, being persuasive, being will-liked.” (Popkin, in Bloom 12) It may be true that a small man can be as apt for tragedy as a great man, but if this small man is not only small as far as social standards, but also as far as his intellectual or mental or moral capabilities are concerned, then it becomes tough to be convincing on a stage.

Raymond Williams describes Willy as a man “who from selling things has passed to selling himself.” (Williams, in Bloom 15) Without any pressing necessity, one might add, or a deliberate purpose, like, for example, Faust. Willy, in fact, is completely lost in this labyrinth of new values none of which he fully grasps. Paradoxically enough, he accuses Biff of being a failure for being lost in the greatest country on in the world. He has lost his “rock bottom” (Miller 102), a metaphor Charley coins in the epitaph. If there ever was a rock bottom, for him or for anybody. And if there was or is to be one, it would have to be made up of exactly these capabilities I mentioned above: intellectual, mental and moral ones. Willy shows neither of them.

As for the first one, Miller never pretended to have Willy on the intellectual side. He (Willy) is a man good with his hands, probably a fine eye for colours, but essentially a working man: “there’s more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made.” (Miller 101) Yet he refuses to accept the adventure of the jungle where men with callous hands surely would have come in handy. Willy prefers velvet slippers - probably the eventual

dream of all working men. And Stanley Kauffmann (in Bloom 21) simply can't understand why a man engaged in the selling business does not see the immense value of his own house awaiting the oncoming of all the surrounding apartment buildings. His lot must be worth millions in a few years time, and Willy worries about his mortgages. This somehow split personality is reflected in the two different careers of his sons, the one, Happy, following a business career, the other, Biff, trying to get along as a farmhand. Both of them turn out flops, which additionally proves how vain Willy's dreams are.

Schizophrenia, then, if the word is allowed here, brings us to the second capability, his mental structure. From the numerous flashbacks we learn that he has always been very jumpy in his conclusions; "mercurial", as Miller himself puts it - quite a euphemistic term for a behaviour that shows more than one incidence of mental instability. Or how else can his aggressiveness towards his wife or to his neighbour Charley be interpreted? Or his outbreak in Howard's office? Or his mental collapse in Stanley's bar? Or, most of all, his final insight that "you end up worth more dead than alive." (Miller 70) Although one must admit that such a phrase carries the germ of heroism in it - uttered by a man who only sees the materialistic side of these words their intrinsic value begins to pale. And what we see of Willy in these last twenty-four hours of his life does not add much to a reconciliation with his mental state. There are no less than seven mental flashbacks to the past, beside the one of the beginning when he nearly drives off to the shoulder of the road. And even when he is 'awake' he constantly changes places from inside the house where his responsibility lies and the back yard or garden where he futilely tries to plant some seeds. Willy has become a day-dreamer who no longer can distinguish between the present and the past, between his dreams and reality. And it is in fact in one of his dreams that he gains his final insight: to kill himself to be at least once of any worth for his family. As if the family had been longing for that, among all things.

Coming to the last stronghold of the classical tragic hero, his moral integrity, I'm afraid that expectations again fall short with respect to Willy. At least it seems difficult to identify with someone who accepts stealing building material or twists stealing baseballs into personal initiative, who treats his wife like he was wiping the floor with her, betrays her with another woman, and permanently lies to his kids, no matter his motives for any of these incidents. His only values are, as Szeliski calls them, "not moral or ethical values, but situational and material codes." (Szeliski, in Bloom 17) And, just in case, Willy does indeed live in a world without moral assumptions, it certainly would have been his assignment as the little man replacing the great man as the tragic hero to re-institute one acceptable moral standard, one identifiable ethical value, one substantial idea to live by. Wouldn't it?

Conclusion

In any good tragedy, the hero has to die in the end, leaving something behind that people may take home. In Willy's case, I was convinced at first that his was a fate very comparable to the fates of many of us who no longer have a firm grip on our reality. I read the play -accompanied by Volker Schlöndorff's film version - some fifty years after its first appearance, and I can say that the feeling of being lost still lasts with many of us. And I seem to be in good company, what with its nearly universal acceptance for so many years. Yet, after many discussions about the character of Willy in private circles and reading the critical 'amendments' to the play and Miller's own statements, I begin to doubt that what I initially (mis)took for pathos was not pathos at all but sympathy for a pathetic man. I'm no native speaker of English to decide within what time span the word pathetic has changed its meaning, or whether it has always meant what it seems to mean now, and I most probably don't know enough about the times after the Great Depression or World War II - it's funny, anyway, that this latter event is never mentioned in a play with two big and strong boys like Biff and Happy - to decide what mood the American nation was in at that time. To me, this

cut in history has always been just the event for a new beginning, for a new taking stock of one's bearings, for a new orientation in one's attitudes and values, for a new hero rising from the ashes of a shattered world. The question was if Willy Loman could be this hero. My answer is no. I agree with Linda that "attention must be finally paid to such a person" (Miller 39) and that he is "not allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog." (Miller 39) In a way Miller gives his own answer to his pretension of creating a modern tragic hero out of petty Mr. Loman when he allows only those closest to him to his funeral. Nobody else is paying attention. "A dime in a dozen" (Miller 97) is shoveled under. Come to think of it, weren't all the other great men, in some way, also just a dime in a dozen? A little extravagant, in one way or another, for sure. But then ...

Shakespeare probably found the answer when he lets Macbeth say that life is but "a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (Shakespeare 76)

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