"DEATH OF A SALESMAN" EXAMINED IN THE LIGHT OF THE ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPTS OF ACTION, PLOT, AND HERO

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I

Tragedy cannot possibly be the same thing from age to age. It is only natural and fitting that modern tragedy should concern itself with a modern tragic hero in a modern situation and that, ours being an era of democracy, our tragical drama should treat an average man as its hero. *Death of a Salesman* is Arthur Miller's attempt to modernize and revive the genre of tragedy, which has almost disappeared; Joseph Wood Krutch's "The Tragic Fallacy," published in 1929 in *The Modern Temper*, was not alone in heralding the "death of tragedy."[1] In the play, Linda, the wife of the protagonist, Willy Loman, acts at one point as a spokesman for the playwright:

> Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.[2]

1. Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic Fallacy," *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929; A Harvest Book, 1956), pp. 79–97.
2. Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Text ant Criticism*, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 56. All references to *Death of a Salesman* are to this edition and will be cited in parentheses in the text.

Miller deliberately chooses a common man as the agent for his tragedy; he tries not only to elevate humiliated modern man, but also to liberate him from the yoke of rank, thereby deviating markedly from the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero as "one who is highly renowned and prosperous."[1] This deviation, at the same time a challenge flung at Krutch's notion of modern man as too debased by science to be a tragic hero, has inevitably led Miller to be engulfed in a whirlpool of controversy over the possibility of tragedy in modern times. Yet Miller's choice of an average man for his tragedy has not been the target of attack so much as the quality of his tragic protagonist, for the debate has centered on the question of whether or not Willy Loman achieves the tragic insight, and thereby the tragic stature, belonging to the tragic hero as defined by Aristotle. However, not much attention has been paid to the play's structure, wherein should lie the key to the meaning of the play. A careful examination of the play shows Miller was indebted to Aristotle's theory of tragedy set forth in the *Poetics*; even when he differed distinctly from Aristotle, as he did in his choice of hero, he consciously used Aristotle's dicta as a basis for his deviation. It seems to me, therefore, that there is much that is Aristotelian in Miller's dramaturgy, indicating that the playwright is still writing within the main stream of tragedy. Rather than discussing, as most critics have done, how the play *differs* from traditional tragedy, I would like to examine it more positively in the light of the Aristotelian concepts of action, plot, and the tragic hero.

II

The fundamental principle underlying Aristotel's concept of art, of virtue, and of life is

1. S. H. Butcher, trans., "Aristotle's Poetics XIII," in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, by S. H. Butcher, 4th ed. (1895; rpt. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), p. 45.

> ...Becoming not Being; and Becoming to him meant not an appearing and a vanishing away, but a process of development, an unfolding of what is already in the germ, an upward ascent ending in Being which is the highest object of knowledge.[1]

This basic philosophy governs his conception of tragedy.

> Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or reverse.[2]

The concept of action implies organic growth and a perpetual Becoming; only when the play attains its full stop is its meaning clear. Viewing Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipvs Rex* at the end of the play as simultaneously criminal, savior, and blind man is possible because the audience has witnessed the growth and dissolution of this one human being and perceived him change from a triumphant king to a tragic hero. Sophocles unfolded that in Oedipus' nature which was always present in the germ and let the audience witness this Becoming directly on the stage. Miller seems to be implying this basic principle of Becoming in his tragic view: "...the need of man to wholly *realize* himself is the only fixed star. ..."[3] "The tragic right," he continues, "is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to *flower and realize* itself."[4] Miller keeps in tune with the idea of Becoming as essential to dramatic art, however different his tragic vision may be from Sophocles'.

According to Aristotle, characters should be developed only with an eye to the action and should serve to illustrate this process of Becoming. The Aristotelian concept of character is dynamic in the sense that a person is nothing except in terms of his actions. Char-

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1. Butcher, "Poetry and Fine Art," p. 160.
2. "Poetics VI," p. 27.
3. Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in Weales, p. 146. (Italics mine.)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 145. (Italics mine.)

acters exist only in so far as they are conceived of as embodying and making concrete actions. This concept does not imply, however, that characters may freely choose what they will become.

> They reveal their personality not in all its fulness, but to such an extent as the natural course of the action may require. The situation and the circumstances in which they are placed...are precisely those which are best fitted to search out their weak places, to elicit their energy and exhibit it in action.[1]

Therefore, free and self-determined though they are, "they exercise their freedom within a sphere which is prescribed by"[2] the primary condition of action. Hence, character "comes in as subsidiary to the actions."[3]

Tied in with this idea of character is the famous and controversial *hamartia* theory: the tragic action must be carried on by an agent "whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some *error* or *frailty*."[4] Aristotle's use of the words "error" and "frailty" has been pointed out by several modern classicists as misleading because unqualified; they have looked in vain to find error or frailty in the Oedipus of *Oedipus Rex*, which to Aristotle was an ideal tragedy and to which he referred frequently in his *Poetics*. Consequently, these classicists have expanded Aristotle's unqualified statement. Butcher states:

> A single great error, whether morally culpable or not; a single great defect in a character otherwise noble, --each and all of these may carry with them the tragic issues of life and death.[5]

Since this flaw (*hamartia*) impinges upon the crucial issue of tragedy as the movement from prosperity to adversity, it must necessarily be a very distinct and distinctive feature of the tragic protagonist.

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1. Butcher, "Plot and Character," p. 349.
2. *Ibid.*
3. "Poetics VI," p. 27.
4. *Ibid.*, XIII, p. 45.
5. Butcher, "The Ideal Tragic Hero," p. 321.

William Arrowsmith speaks on this point with reference to Oedipus: "...the most simple pertinent fact of the Oedipus was not the hero's flaw but his refusal to accept a ready-made fate: he wants his own fate, not the gods', and though his personal fate may be cut short by his doom."[1] Cedric H. Whitman joins Arrowsmith by contending that "the famous *hamartia* in actuality is a part of Oedipus' central virtue" and that it is not a defect of his quality, but evidence of his quality and the way in which he differs from other men.[2] The convergence of all these authoritative opinions seems to illustrate that the *hamartia* inherent in the tragic hero is his potentiality as well as his limitation. Latent in the process of realizing his potentiality is the germ of his limitation, leading him to destruction; he must necessarily realize all his own potentialities which include the limitations of his nature. This is the very quality which distinguishes the tragic hero from other men. This concept of the tragic hero in the light of the *hamartia* theory, with all that it implies, is reflected in Miller's theory of tragedy. His version, or revaluation, of it focuses on the hero's "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity..." and the idea that "only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are 'flawless.'"[3] A flaw that is no flaw is implanted in the nature of the tragic hero. This flaw must, however, be actualized through the imitation of an action.

Since tragedy is "the imitation of an action," and since "the plot is the imitation of the action,"[4] the plot becomes "the soul of tragedy."[5] Aristotle considers the plot as the primary element in the

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1. William Arrowsmith, "The Criticism of Greek Tragedy," in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 336.
2. Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 131.
3. "Tragedy and the Common Man," p. 144.
4. "Poetics VI," p. 25.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

artistic structure of the drama, and, hence, as the most important feature of a tragedy. He insists on unity of plot and discusses how to achieve it.

> Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life, which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. ...Homer...seems to have happily discerned the truth. In composing the Odyssey he did not include all the adventures of Odyssey--such as his wound on Parnassus, or his feigned madness at the mustering of the host--incidents between which there was no necessary or probable connection: but he made the Odyssey, and likewise the Iliad, to center round an action, that in our sense of the word is one. As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one, when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole.[1]

The choice of an action is thus the first artistic necessity. Plotting consists of a second individualization and limiting process, thus distinguishing plot from action and isolating action from the region of the undefined and indeterminate by its embodiment in specific incidents. The action, then, is that "inward and causal bond"[2] which synthesizes the incidents of the plot. *Oedipus Rex*, for example, incarnates these principles. Although the myth of Oedipus surely includes many exciting dramatic incidents, such as Oedipus' flight from Corinth and the murder of Laios, Sophocles, because he wanted to dramatize the seeking action as a whole, selected only the incidents which would show the *dramatis personae* seeking their own welfare; therefore, the action of the play as a whole has "the common motive...to save Thebes from its plague by finding the unknown culprit,"[3] as Francis Fergusson points out. Not only Oedipus, he continues, but also the minor characters are effectively suitable

1. *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 33-35.
2. Butcher, "Poetry and Fine Art," p. 276.
3. Francis Fergusson, Introduction to *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc.; Dramabooks, 1965), pp. 23-24.

for representing the main action of the play--for example, "Tiresias, who knows the will of the gods all along, but cannot himself take the lead in cleansing the city; or Jocasta, who obscurely fears the truth, and so feels that Thebes would be better off in ignorance."[1] They all act with a view to the action of the play as a whole. Hence, Sophocles' choice of an action determined the incidents, which are structurally related to it, thus giving rise to the unity of plot. By beginning near the end of the myth and by showing only the last episodes of his hero's career as a king, he places the past incidents in significant relationship to the present. Thus, the action is given a beginning, a middle, and an end in time through the medium of the plot. Although Aristotle was by no means unfamiliar with tragedies plotted like the *Odyssey* with "a double thread of plot,"[2] he preferred "the stricter unity of the single plot and the single catastrophe."[3] Francis Fergusson assumes that if Aristotle had read Shakesperean tragedies, he would have modified his view.[4] Even so, Fergusson continues, Aristotle's "principle of the unity of action is still the best way we have to describe the unity of a work of art, including the vast and complex ones with two or more plots."[5]

III

Just as Sophocles chose to dramatize the last episodes of Oedipus' career as a king, Arthur Miller begins *Death of a Salesman* near the end of Willy Loman's career as a salesman, and near the end of his life. He is an unsuccessful salesman who, at the beginning of the play, is seen to be struggling to achieve some measure of success in order to make his family comfortable and happy. Ex-

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
2. "Poetics XIII," p. 47.
3. Fergusson, p. 22.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Fergusson, p. 22.

hausted and discouraged though he is by his sense of failure, he is seen to be still pursuing his "tremendously powerful ideals"[1] --his desire to become a successful salesman in order to realize his true self and his role as father and husband. Therefore, his battle in the market place gives rise to a quest for values by which the significance of his existence can be found, just as Oedipus' struggle to find the murderer of Laios, and thereby to achieve peace and order in Thebes, becomes in time a search for values by which the meaning of his existence can be examined and revealed. If Oedipus is caught in a god-sprung trap of fate--that is, the whole concatenation of events, symbolizing life itself,[2] Willy finds himself in a competitive world of business, one where "a failure in society and business has no right to live."[3] It is as stark a reality as Oedipus', as Miller explains: "When a man gets old you fire him. You would have to, he can't do the work."[4] Hence, it is against the accepted American norms of success in the market place that Willy Loman exerts himself to fulfill his need for spiritual values. The action embodied through the arrangement of incidents--that is, the plot--points to Willy's attempt at self-realization. The standards of success as a goal have reference both to the market and, at the same time, to the inner world of Willy's conflicting and divided rationalizations with regard to his true self and his family relationships.

The plot, the arrangement of incidents, is designed to represent a desperate quest for ethical values. The incidents, rising to a crescendo, reveal the action through their causative relationships, which lead to moral and emotional meanings. Miller's basic unit of composition is the family. It is also, by implication, the largest cohesive order which he can assume as valid in the modern world. However,

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1. Arthur Miller, "Morality and Modern Drama: Interview with Phillip Gelb," in Weales, p. 175.
2. Whitman, p. 139.
3. Arthur Miller, "Introduction to *Collected Plays*," in Weales, p. 169.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

it is seen in terms of a complex web of emotions stemming from the father-son and sibling relationships. The nature of the action is defined by these relationships, which are presented through the arrangement of the events. For example, the father-son relationship between Willy and Biff, disordered because of the way Willy has attempted to impose his ideal of success on Biff, is ironically paralleled in one of its aspects by Willy's relation to his own father: Willy never knew his father--hence, he had lost his father. The relationship revealed through Willy's flashbak-reverie and the relationship between Willy and Biff are dramatically relevant to the plot, for it is through Biff's gradual rejection of his father's values that Willy is finally driven to catastrophe.

Similarly, Howard, like Willy, has lost his father, who, while alive, was a humane employer to Willy. Howard, now Willy's employer, is shown to be hollow in his relationship to his son: it is seen only in terms of the mechanical tape-recorder. The quality of this relationship is as empty as Willy's is to Biff. In addition, Howard, who, in a spiritual sense, should stand in a father-son relationship to Willy, since Willy named him, instead disregards and eventually fires Willy; his actions are analogous to those of Happy and Biff and to Biff's eventual rejection of his father. This godfather-godson relationship is also dramatically relevant to the plot, for Howard's dismissal of Willy is directly connected to the chain of causal events propelling Willy to suicide.

The father-son combination of Charley and Bernard provides a dramatic foil to that of Willy and Biff. The former have achieved success in ways which are most satisfactory in the light of their human potentialities; hence, they are free from any struggle and conflict, and are static. This father-son relationship, in turn, places the Willy-Biff combination in a tragic light: the former's success accentuates Willy's suffering because of his own failure and also his agony over Biff's failure, and thus raises Willy to the level of the obsessed tragic heroes of traditional tragedy.

The sibling relationships in the cases of Happy and Biff and Willy and Ben, as seen through the action and plot, reflect on each other: both Willy and Happy are younger brothers, and Willy worships Ben in much the same way that Happy regards Biff. However, the objects of worship, Ben and Biff, embody qualities which are seen by the audience as false and dishonest in the case of Ben and as illusory and transient in the case of Biff. All of these variations on the themes of father-son and sibling relationships are revealed as a result of the way in which each character adumbrates the action and the way in which the relationships are interwoven with one another by the arrangement of consequential events. However, unlike Sophocles' characters, who all act in relation to the central action of the play as a whole--that is, to find the slayer of Laios, Miller's characters as a group share no such common goal. What they have in common is their individual attempts to become successful. Therefore, Miller uses the theme of the struggle to become successful as his means to control the plot and achieve its unity; in other words, he replaces the Aristotelian unity of action with the unity of theme. Thus, the unity of theme becomes the equivalent of the unity of action in Miller's play.

Miller's version of the unity of action--that is, the unity of theme--in Act One revolves around the theme of finding out what went wrong in the characters' effort to succeed in the market place so as to achieve happiness, stability, and meaning in life. Hence, the plot is geared to represent this theme in specific instances. Each character in this act is predominantly suffering and rationalizing his present lost position, groping with undigested memories of the past in an attempt to cope with the uninformed present. Each fights unpleasant truths, yet senses some mysterious event in the past, when all went wrong. Act One can be looked upon as including many versions of homecoming, which set in motion the theme--"to find out what went wrong." Here the conflicts and visions of each are contrasted. It is not the overt bickerings and squabbles that are

sensed as fundamental; rather, hidden conflicts are felt at a deeper level. The homecomings move from Linda and Willy's present conception of home to the feelings of Biff and Happy, who have just arrived home, to a remembered homecoming as it used to be, and finally to an ideal homecoming in Willy's eyes--that of his older brother Ben. Here Miller, like Sophocles, reveals past incidents which have a causative relation to the present happenings. However, this flashback device is not meant, as some critics say, to replace the "usual compressed expository report" antecedent to the action;[1] rather, it is woven into the fabric of the plot as a necessary and integral part of the tragic action. Just as the revelation of the past incidents by several characters evolves out of the tragic action of Oedipus' quest for knowledge, the reconstruction of the past through Willy's hallucinations, reveries, and remembrances is organically related to the tragic action of the play, as I will point out later. At the same time, this structural device serves to give tragic dimension to the play, for it raises Willy's suicide "to the level of sacrifice by linking it to Willy's early dreams."[2]

The play opens with Willy's homecoming. Willy, stooped and exhausted, has unexpectedly arrived home in the middle of the night. A sense of anxiety looms large. He tells his wife Linda that he has had to turn around and come home for fear that otherwise he would drive off the road.

> ...it's me, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm--I can't seem to--to keep my mind to it...I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts. (pp. 13-14)

These maneuverings with the car are basically suicidal in their tendency, and the audience realizes that Willy's homecoming marks a turning point in his life, that he is no longer capable of functioning

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1. Judah Bierman, James Hart, and Stanley Johnson, "Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*," in Weales, p. 266.
2. *Ibid.*

totally in terms of himself, and that his powers have become alienated from him. He is felt throughout to be driven to self-destruction when his rational moral being dissolves under the pressure of failure.

Linda, his wife, feels his failure and its danger. She senses "the thing that went wrong," but does not understand it. She consoles Willy in his failure by attributing its causes to physical exhaustion, bad eyeglasses, and the difficulty of traveling, and urges him to get a job in New York that will not require him to drive. Although Linda fears "the thing that went wrong," she seeks to alleviate Willy's suffering by sustaining his faith in himself and his values. Thus, Linda is a modern equivalent of a Greek chorus,[1] who, while participating in the action, sympathizes with the protagonist (whether she understands him or not) and comments on the meaning of the action, as in the case of the first passage from the play quoted in this paper. According to John Gassner, modern tragedy often has a group of minor characters who have a role that is not radically different from that of a Greek chorus.[2] In fact, Linda, Charley, Biff, and Happy, gathered together beside Willy's grave, are like a Greek chorus in the final Requiem scene, as I will discuss later.

Willy's homecoming initiates the theme of finding out what went wrong in his effort to succeed in the market place. Willy feels that

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1. It is interesting to note that Aristotle says ("Poetics XVIII," p. 60) that "The chorus should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole and share in the action, in the manner...of Sophocles." Aristotle's comment on the chorus is fragmentary, and many scholars have tried to determine exactly what he meant by this statement. H. D. F. Kitto (in "The Dramatic Art of Sophocles," *Greek Tragedy* (N. Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1952; rpt., Anchor Books, 1954)) points out that Sophocles' use of the chorus differed greatly from play to play. However, it is remarkable that all Sophoclean choruses are invested with "some individual character," "have their own view," often not the right one, behave as "a person, not as a machine," and are always "concerned in the action."

2. John Gassner, "The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy," in Corrigan, p. 411.

he has been slighted by his present employer, Howard, his late boss's son, who has reduced him to straight commission, despite the fact that Willy has "put thirty-four years" (p. 14) into the firm. While resenting that "that boy Howard" doesn't "appreciate" him (p. 14), Willy dreams of what he could have been by now if Howard's father had been alive: "...I'd a been in charge of New York now!" (p. 14) More directly and at the core of his suffering is Biff: "There's such an undercurrent in him. He became a moody man. Did he apologize when I left this morning?" (p. 15) Willy has had just as much faith in Biff as in himself, thereby making his son his means for achieving success. At this point, however, Biff is incapable of living up to his father's expectations. What Willy divines as Biff's present condition-- "having yet to make thirty-five dollars a week" --and what he could be-- "big in no time. ...Like Thomas Edison or B. F. Goodrich" (pp. 16-18) --is seen by Willy as "the thing that went wrong." Thus, Willy's suffering stems from "not having attained his idealized image of himself" and "Biff's not having attained Willy's idealized image of Biff,"[1] and it alternates between the antipodes of his exalted ideals and the reality of his and Biff's present discouraging conditions. Moreover, Willy is seen throughout to be struggling "to prove his worth against the fear that he has failed as both a father and a salesman."[2]

The search into the past--that is, the past in the present, is structurally provided by Miller in the opening scene through Willy's confused associations of the "'28 Chevy" with the present model: "I was thinking of the Chevy. ...That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevy today" (p. 19). Again, past and present are contrasted by his nostalgic remembering of:

> ...This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room. (p.17)

1. Edward Murray, *Arthur Miller, Dramatist* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1967), p. 38.
2. *Ibid*

> The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more. (p. 17)

The juxtaposition of sensuous images of past and present is not only effective in revealing Willy's sensitivity and in making palpable Linda and Willy's suffering in his failure; it also prepares the audience for the actual transition in time from the present to the past. In this way, the audience is also prepared for simultaneous actions in the present and the past--that is, the present action with the past action, as revealed through Willy's reveries, hallucinations, and remembrances, are interwoven in a causative relationship.

As the Willy-Linda scene draws to a close, Biff and Happy are illuminated in the bedroom upstairs, listening to the conversation below. The transition is evolved through a montage of language. The fusion of the two scenes in such a manner makes the audience aware that the version of homecoming seen by the two boys is directly connected with, and similar to, Willy's plight. Both boys are seen as frustrated and lost. Although they too have tried to become successful, thereby to achieve meaning in their lives, Biff feels lost, "like a boy" (p. 22), and feels that he is wasting his life after having had "twenty or thirty different jobs" (p. 22), while Happy is "lonely" (p. 23) despite having his "own apartment, a car, and plenty of women" (p. 23). Through a profusion of adolescent memories occasioned by their return to their childhood room, they too seek a reason for their present discontent. The shared memories of sexual conquests in their adolescence belie and symbolize their present feeling of emptiness, for these experiences with women are completely devoid of meaning or feeling, not having borne any fruitful result. Because emptiness for a long period of time is painful, both are seen as seeking to achieve meaning in their lives; Biff wishes "to find a girl--steady, somebody with substance" (p. 25), with which Happy agrees: "Somebody with character, with resistance. Like Mom..." (p. 25). Since neither of them has as yet achieved any fruitful result, both are seen as suffering.

Biff's suffering is accentuated particularly, and it is the quality of his torment which introduces Biff as a possible antagonist to Willy. Told by Happy that something disturbing is happening to Willy and that Willy is always talking to himself about Biff and his failures, Biff reveals hostility toward his father. For Biff alone knows his father's secret, as he hints to Happy: "There's one or two other things depressing him..." (p. 21). Biff is referring to an occasion (which the audience will see for itself later) when he caught his father in a hotel with a strange woman, a buyer; thus seeing his father as a "fake" destroyed Biff's values and gave him an excuse for his present failure. Rather than feeling, as Happy does, that his father is his victim, Biff regards himself as his father's victim. Biff is caught by the necessity to make a success of himself; he too is shown as desperately searching for answers for his failure. Biff's struggle to find himself leads him to a questioning of his father's values and eventuates in his rejection of them; this rejection, in turn, crushes Willy, who continues throughout the play to push Biff to make a success of himself. Hence, Biff will eventually move into the foreground as the antagonist to Willy, each passionately challenging the other. Intensified is Biff's hostility toward Willy when he thinks of visiting his old employer, Bill Oliver: "I wonder if Oliver still thinks I stole that carton of basket balls?" (p. 26), for the pangs of guilt felt at the thought of theft causes him to think again of its cause, his father. The scene ends with Biff muttering "that stupid selfish..." (p. 27).

The Biff-Happy scene turns directly into a scene of the past--to one of Willy's earlier homecomings from a sales trip in New England. This scene is an enactment of Willy's state of mind, containing undigested events. Although the remembered past or flashback begins deceptively by showing Willy happy and delighted to be put on a pedestal by his sons, as he returns home with presents to the boys and boastful talk about his popularity and big sales, it moves to his unfaithfulness to his wife, to his realization that his sons are

stealing and failing at school, and finally to his confession to Linda that really he has not achieved any success at all on his trip. Each remembrance, the continuation of each motif already introduced, gives a further turn of the screw to his desperate quest for reasons for his failure. Willy, in searching for causes for his failure, is psychologically torn asunder. He is seeking, not new values, but a reason for the failure of values which to him seemed permanent.

The scene changes when Willy is awakened from the realm of reminiscence to the situation of the moment by his son Happy. Charley, the neighbor, because of the commotion aroused, comes in to comfort Willy and offers him a job. Here is the introduction of another important character. Charley is Willy's antithesis,[1] for he, unlike Willy and his sons, is a successful businessman; throughout the course of action, he is seen to be the only man who offers Willy any positive help. In addition, Charley, as Willy's antithesis, serves to give a tragic dimension to Willy. Miller explains:

> The most decent man in *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalist (Charley) whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's. The great difference between them is that Charley is not a fanatic. Equally, however, he has learned how to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of spirit which Willy chases to his end.[2]

Charley, unlike Willy, is a practical-minded man, not motivated by high hopes and ideals; he does not possess the "ecstasy of spirit" epitomized by Willy's dream and ideal of success, which move him to the limit of his capacity. Willy the tragic hero is distinguished from Charley the non-tragic character through his rejection of Charley's offer of a job as a possible solution to his present financial dilemma. Willy as a tragic hero must necessarily pursue his goal of success through his energetic assertion of himself; therefore, he cannot accept Charley's offer, for the acceptance of it would mean to

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1. Dennis Welland, *Arthur Miller* (London: Oliver and Boyd, Ltd., 1961), p. 55.
2. "Introduction to *Collected Plays*," p. 170.

him a surrender to defeat and a recognition of his total failure. The scene ends in a quarrel between the two men because Willy, insulted by Charley's offer and thereby pressed for answers for the causes of his failure, suffers hallucinations of his older brother Ben's homecoming.

Charley's angry exit brings Willy's hallucinations of Ben's homecoming into the foreground. Willy's search for the causes of his failure leads him to a questioning of his values in the sense that he questions Ben, who stands for his ideals. Ben, in telling Willy and his children "Never fight fair with a stranger" (p. 49), embodies all the ruthless and aggressive qualities necessary to "grub for money" (p. 24). Ben's code of business worked for him; he "walked into the jungle--and when [he] was twenty-one [he] walked out, and by God, [he] was rich" (p. 48). Ben's homecoming leads to Willy's discovery of a goal, for he has been feeling "temporary" about himself and has been seeking values which will give meaning to his life and his family: "...rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them [his children] with...I was right" (p. 53). Willy, so thoroughly enthralled by Ben's success, is too blind to see through Ben's ruthlessness and aggressiveness, to which he himself is alien by nature, for he is not made to "grub for money," as Biff pointed out earlier. It is from this point in the past to the present moment that Willy has vigorously been carrying on a difficult struggle for sales for which he is not really suited. Moreover, it is his wholehearted acceptance of Ben's false values and his nurture of his children upon this principle which has placed him in a false position, which haunts him throughout, and which eventuates in the final catastrophe. Significantly, in the same scene Willy is seen to be renovating the entire front stoop. Later in the Requiem scene Biff eulogizes his father by referring to this front stoop; Willy's real ability was, that is, to work with his hands. Consequently, this scene suggests how great Willy could have been, while at the same time revealing the wrong goal he chose in the past, which bears directly upon his present dilemma.

Willy, interrupted by Linda in his hallucinations, goes out to take a walk. The scene mounts in suspense as Biff, Happy, and Linda begin to talk about Willy. Asked by his mother why he is hostile to Willy, Biff no longer hesitates to show his growing disgust toward his father, thus emerging clearly as Willy's antagonist. However, Linda (in the speech I quoted at the beginning of this paper) argues that even though Willy is not a great man, just because he is a human being he must have what all men are entitled to--his children's love and attention. If his name is not to go into the permanent records of mankind, he must at least have recognition by and sympathy from his children--a kind of immortality that Willy as a common man deserves--because his suffering stems from his ruling passion: his love for and his desire for the success of his favorite son, Biff, and of his family. Thus, through Linda's speech, Miller not only saves Willy from becoming a mere pathetic character, but also gives him tragic dimensions; as John Gassner says: "He has been made into a dramatically charged father-hero, and as such becomes a tragic figure in active pursuit of the father-son ideal."[1] Told by Linda that Willy has attempted suicide and that his life is in Biff's hands, Biff decides, against his will, to try again to live up to his father's expectations, thus attempting one more effort to please Willy. Yet this forced effort, now diametrically opposed to the true self of which he has been in search, moves Biff to challenge his father when he enters the house. A quarrel follows; at last, though, Willy goes to bed; pacified by Linda, both Happy and Biff go to say good-night to their father, and tell him of their plan to see Oliver, Biff's former employer. Hence, the situation coercing Biff to act against his will rises in tension, and the audience apprehends that the inevitable collision between father and son will soon take place. The appeased Willy is, though, shown in the bedroom upstairs still to be haunted by his dreams of Biff as a hero:

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1. John Gassner, "*Death of a Salesman:* First Impressions, 1949," in Weales, p. 236.

> Like a young god. Hercules--something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out--Loman, Loman, Loman...he'll be great yet. (p. 68)

Still unwilling to succumb to defeat both for Biff and himself, Willy is put to sleep by Linda's lullaby. The gap between his big dreams and his present condition is so wide that the scene creates a tremendous feeling of pity and pathos on the part of the audience.

Act Two begins peacefully with a breakfast scene of Linda and Willy talking to each other, giving the audience a moment of relief. However, the action is soon shown to be the continuation of Act One. All the family members appear to begin the day hopefully: Biff has already gone out to see Bill Oliver, leaving a message to invite their father to join him and Happy for dinner that evening; Willy, too, begins hopefully by going to see Howard to ask for a new position in New York. Then there occurs Aristotle's "reversal of the situation," "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability and necessity"[1]: the hopeful effect intended by the peaceful and auspicious opening scene is reversed, and an unexpected but probable incident follows. Willy is fired by Howard and goes in desperation to see Charley in his son's office to borrow some money from him to pay his insurance. Charley again offers Willy a job, but Willy rejects it once more, thus refusing to resign himself to defeat to the very end. The presence of Charley's son, now a successful lawyer, whom Willy has always looked down on as a contemptible bookworm, heightens Willy's sense of failure because of the contrast between Bernard's success and Biff's failure. Willy asks Bernard the secret of his success and what went wrong with Biff. Bernard remembers the time in the past when Biff started drifting. Bernard is referring to the time when Biff flunked math and never made it up despite the chance and desire that Biff had to

1. "Poetics XI," p. 41.

do so. Forced by Bernard to recall the past meeting between Biff and himself when the former went to Boston to consult the latter about his problems, Willy is agonized by the memories of Biff bursting in on him and the cheap woman and of his son's utter disillusionment in his father, manifested in Biff's vow never to go to college, thereby never to succeed in life. Here the audience and Willy both see the cause of Biff's failure and how his aversion to his father was precip itated by this incident. Willy's hallucinations become exacerbated after the discovery of the terrible cause of what went wrong with Biff; Willy is unable to talk or listen to Biff when, just arrived in the restaurant, he is utterly horrified at having stolen Oliver's pen. Finding Willy incoherent, Biff and Happy walk out on him.

The next scene at home is the culminating point. Willy, half-mad, is seen planting vegetables in the yard at night. This act itself is a sign of his total loss of self-control, but it also echoes the opening scene of the play in which Willy recollects the beautiful past when they were surrounded by the living flowers and trees; this scene, because of the contrast between Willy's initial sensitivity and his present madness, evokes Aristotle's pity and fear. Although seeming to have lost completely control of his reason, Willy is really making a final desperate attempt to achieve something at the cost of his life; his half-mad and incoherent speech reveals him haunted by his guilt toward his wife, who he thinks has suffered much, and his fear of being called a coward by his sons if he commits suicide.

Aristotle's concept of a complex action as including Reversal accompanied by Recognition[1] is enacted when Biff comes into the yard to challenge his father. Biff confronts Willy by accusing him of having "phony dreams" and says that they all have been living under delusions to the extent that they don't know who they really are.

Biff: Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Willy: I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman.

Biff: I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hardworking drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour. ...A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home! (p. 132)

However right Biff's accusation may be, Willy, with all his suffering and struggle, evokes a tremendous amount of pity from the audience when thus accused. Just as Biff is on the verge of rejecting his father, though, the Reversal takes place: Biff breaks down, clings to his father, and expresses his filial love, which is above and beyond any differences of opinion between Willy and himself. This reversal is accompanied by the Recognition, Willy's recognition of Biff's filial love; thus Willy's feeling of hatred is succeeded by that of love in the Aristotelian manner--"Recognition...is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for...bad fortne."[1] Willy is deeply moved and at the same time exalted by the realization of his son's love; finally, he goes out to commit suicide so as to rescue his family from its financial predicament, so as to give something of himself to his family, and so as to "leave a thumbprint somewhere on the world,"[2] even at the cost of his life. Again, here is a reversal of the situation: the money which will take care of his family's financial crisis is obtained by his death, which constitutes a tragic incident in the Aristotelian sense.

The Requiem scene, which marks the denouement of the play, provides what is in Greek tragedy the place for a more disinterested contemplation of the human condition itself, needed for the suffering to have some positive value. Each of the remaining characters responds characteristically to Willy's suicide. None calls him a coward.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
2. Arthur Miller, "Introduction to *Collected Plays*," p. 162.

Thus, the minor characters function here, as in the manner of a Greek chorus, commenting on the meaning of Willy's suicide and of his suffering. Biff mentions that Willy did not know who he was and then speaks of what his father could have been and what he was capable of:

> There was a lot of nice days. When he'd come home from a trip: or on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch; when he built the extra bathroom; and put up the garage. ...there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made. (p. 138)

Happy speaks:

> I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have--to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him. (pp. 138-9)

However limited he is in his understanding, Happy is yet aware that his father has struggled tremendously. For his part, Charley speaks of Willy as a salesman:

> Nobody dast blame this man...Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back--that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you are finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream... (p. 138)

Charley, who has been seen throughout as a practical, realistic businessman, empathizes with Willy out of his characteristic pity. He speaks sympathetically of those men whose lives are built of necessity on such unstable foundations as a smile and a shoeshine, "whose satisfactions are no more enduring than dreams of bigger and still bigger orders."[1] A man such as these, Charley continues, must not be blamed "if he chooses to die 'dramatically' in a last attempt to

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1. Bierman, Hart, and Johnson, p. 267.

gain for himself a more substantial place in the memory of men."[1] The play then ends with Linda's sorrow:

> I can't cry. I don't know what it is, but I can't cry. I don't understand it. Why did you ever do that? ...Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. ...And there'll be nobody home. ...We're free and clear. (p. 139)

It has been said that Linda's speech here is inconsistent with her character, for she has known of Willy's previous suicide attempts, of his agony over Biff's and his own failures, and also of Willy's dreams. However, in view of the multi-faceted function of the Greek chorus, I would join Dennis Welland in his idea that "her tears are for humanity."[2] Her tears that are no tears (for she can't cry) seem to represent a more disinterested lamentation over the condition of humanity itself.

Average and mundane though he is, Willy comes close to the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero, whose misfortune is brought about by his *hamartia*, or evidence of a quality that is his virtue as well as his limitation--in this case, Willy's passionate pursuit of the ideal of success in order to realize his role as both a father and a salesman. It is true that Willy lacks not only the high position but also the high degree of intelligence which distinguish Oedipus and other great tragic heroes; however, if Willy should be denied of all awareness, as he is by many critics, he would not have committed suicide. As Miller argues:

> Had Willy been unaware of his separation from values that endure he would have died contentedly while polishing his car. ...But he was agonized by his awareness of being in a false position. ...That he had not the intellectual fluency to verbalize his situation is not the same thing as saying that he lacked awareness, even an overly intensified consciousness that the life he had made was without form and inner

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 267–8.
2. Welland, p. 68.

meaning.[1]

Accordingly, Willy's suicide is the inevitable result of his awareness and of his moment of recognition, as Miller again explains:

> In terms of his character, he has achieved a very powerful piece of knowledge, which is that he is loved by his son and has been embraced by him and forgiven. In this he is given his existence...his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve. That he is unable to take this victory thoroughly to his heart, that it closes the circle for him and propels him to death, is the wage of his sin, which was to have committed himself so completely to the counterfeits of dignity and the false coinage embodied in his idea of success that he can prove his existence only by bestowing "power" on his posterity, a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy.[2]

Although Willy's moment of tragic insight is devoid of the magnificence and grandeur found, for example, in Oedipus', it is plain that the playwright did not conceive of Willy as a merely pathetic character, a total victim of his own false dreams. Our study of the action and plot has demonstrated that his suicide is an act of expiation, since Willy makes his sacrifice in order to leave his son his insurance money after discovering his own responsibility for Biff's failure, and also after learning that Biff still loves him. That his inmost desire has been directed at something greater than his success-worship is the ground on which Willy stands as a tragic hero.

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1. "Introduction to *Collected Plays*," p. 168.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

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