

Death of a Salesman. Tragedy is like a strong acid – it dissolves away all but the very gold of truth.

Ancient Philosopher Aristotle wrote that 'the purpose of a tragedy was to create pity and fear in the audience'. He also stated that 'the tragic hero should be of elevated status in society, thus making his subsequent fall from grace all the more dramatic.' Rather than being a fall from a great height, Death of a Salesman extends this concept to the ordinary person. This makes it more realistic and therefore creates pity and fear within the audience as the 'ordinary person' may be able to relate to the play on a personal level; the pity and fear felt by the audience may be achieved by them witnessing a fate that they fear for themselves.

It could be argued that Willy's lies cloud the truth and tragedy acts like acid to dissolve away these lies until there is nothing but the truth left. At the start of the play Willy is boasting to Linda about his wages, 'I did five hundred gross in Province and seven hundred gross in Boston.' Linda then goes on to calculate his commission and breaks down his lies, like acid, until finally concluding the truth, 'Well, it makes seventy dollars and some pennies.' In some ways this makes us feel pathos for Willy as he has to lie about how much he has earned, something that the ordinary man may be able to relate to, and his pride is shattered in the process. The contrast of the vocabulary used by Willy and Linda, he says 'hundred' and 'gross' where she says 'pennies', helps to reinforce the pathos felt for Willy by distinguishing fantasy from reality. Arguably this is Willy's nadir, his lowest point. His tragic lies have not only helped to dissolve his fantasy that he is a successful salesman but assisted the destruction of his pride. As Willy is talking about his earnings he could show his pride by standing up straight and puffing his chest out. As Linda calculates his commission, 'I've got a pencil. That makes your commission... Two hundred – My God! Two Hundred and twelve dollars!' he could sink out of his upright position and carry on shrinking until the point when he no longer looks proud, possibly even embarrassed and exclaims, 'Well I didn't figure it yet but...' This would emphasise the pity and fear that we feel for Willy's character.

Linda also facilitates the truth being clouded by feeding Willy's fantasy that he is a fine salesman. It seems that Willy starts to undergo an emotional purification, he begins to realise people see him as a joke and he goes unnoticed. He goes on to comment on his appearance and even compares himself to Charley, 'I talk too much... one thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him.' But the protagonist's emotional purification is cut short due to Linda currently reassuring and fuelling this fantasy with comments such as 'you're the handsomest man in the world' and, 'few men are idolised by their children the way you are.' Her persistent compliments lead to Willy believing them himself and arouse pathos in the audience as this confirms he is deluded. Another comment from Linda that leads you to realise the tragic state that Willy is in is during a conversation with Biff and Happy about her husband's condition. She says, 'Attention. Attention must be paid to such a person.' The repetition of the word attention illustrates the desperation

in Linda's argument. The actress playing Linda could further portray this desperation by emphasising the repeated word, almost as if she was begging. This would also help to contribute to helping the audience recognise the tragic quality of the play.

The idea that Willy, and sometimes Linda, is deluded continues throughout the play. Linda seems to think that a type of fridge is the best and most reliable because it has 'got the biggest ads of any of them!' An exclamation mark usually represents strong feelings or high volume, Linda could say this hysterically as if she has been brainwashed by the adverts and really believes what they say. After reminding Willy that they owe money for the fridge being repaired Willy replies, 'It's a fine machine' and it seems the fact that the fridge had the biggest advert outweighs that it is evidently an unreliable machine. Willy's reply has a pathetic tone which helps to illustrate weakness and lack of independence within Willy. This materialistic manner contributes to creating sympathy within the audience for Willy and his family as they fail to see the obvious.

A part in the play where you see the result of tragedy, after everything has been dissolved away and you are left with nothing but the truth is at Willy's funeral. Throughout the play you have seen Willy's fantasy that he is a successful salesman and seen him describe who introduced him to the business world and who he aspired to be like, Dave Singleman. He goes on to reminisce about Dave's funeral, 'Do you know? When he died – and by the way, he died the death of a salesman... hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lot of trains for months after that.' If Willy's fantasy was a reality then he would have had a similar funeral to Dave but in reality no salesmen or buyers attended his funeral, just a few family members. Things may have been sad but not to an extreme; his own wife failed to cry at his funeral. When the actress playing Linda confides in her son about her inability to cry, 'Forgive me, dear. I can't cry' she could say it like she is begging, almost as if she is angry. This would help to create pathos within the audience as we would be able to see that crying is the only thing she wants to do, but the only thing she is incapable of. Aristotle claimed that the 'Hamartia or tragic flaw in the hero's personality caused him to suffer.' In this case Willy's tragic flaw could be that he was not a successful salesman; over time this flaw contributed to problems with money, within the Loman family and eventually to Willy's suicide. This, along with his ignorance in not knowing he is a poor salesman and the refusal to face the truth arouse pity and fear within the audience as it shows us a fate that we fear.

The play's author, Arthur Miller, gradually exposes tragedy throughout the play like a drip feed. In a way this is similar to acid as it is slowly and constantly wearing away at something. In this case it is Willy's tragic life and everything is laid bare in the requiem scene. Arthur Miller has written that, 'to me the tragedy of Willy Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it.' Here the play's author is implying that the true tragedy is that Willy's life lacked meaning, everything he worked for was ultimately for nothing.