

*“Oedipus is an odd kind of hero, who shares many of Willy Loman’s weaknesses; Willy is an odd kind of anti-hero, who displays a similar nobility of character to that which we see in Oedipus. Indeed, Willy may be said to be even more of a tragic hero than Oedipus for, while there appears to be little sense in Oedipus’s self mutilation, Willy’s suicide shows that he is willing to die for what he believes in and sacrifice himself for the good of others.”*

The central characters of “Oedipus The King” and “Death of a Salesman”; Oedipus and Willy Loman, appear to have a lot in common despite the fact the plays were written almost two and half thousand years apart. Both men have been classed as tragic heroes; however, there are many who would argue that Oedipus is and Willy is not, or even that neither of them could really be classed as a tragic hero. In order to decide whether or not either of them are really tragic heroes, one must first know about the definitions of a tragic hero. There are many variations in these definitions which have been developing for more than two thousand years. The weaknesses and strengths of character both Oedipus and Willy Loman display have a role in them being awarded tragic hero status but their fate at the end of the plays is also a key element. Some may argue that Oedipus lives the life of a tragic hero but does not die the death of one, whereas Willy Loman lives the life of a common man but dies the death of a tragic hero. Either way, the validity of Oedipus’s and Willy’s status as tragic heroes will always come down

Aristotle, the great Ancient Greek philosopher, claimed that a tragic hero must possess certain characteristics in order to be classed as a tragic hero. The most important of these characteristics are; nobility or wisdom, hamartia; a fatal flaw that leads to the hero’s downfall, a reversal of fortunes brought about by the hero’s hamartia, anagnorisis; a moment when the hero realises his own flaws brought about his downfall and the audience must feel dramatic irony for the character. As Aristotle was writing in a similar era to the one in which Sophocles wrote Oedipus the King, his criteria for the tragic hero should apply to Oedipus. These important factors do deem Oedipus as a tragic hero. He is a king; this makes him noble, he possesses several weaknesses of character which lead to his downfall, he goes from being the king of Thebes to being exiled from it in a reversal of fortunes, he realises that the reason he is being exiled is because he ordered it himself and the audience feel a great deal of dramatic irony towards him because the play is laced with ironic references to Oedipus’s fate. The Ancient Greek audience would have known the story of Oedipus before going to see the play so the dramatic irony would have been blatantly

obvious. These aspects of Oedipus therefore contradict the statement that “Oedipus is an odd kind of hero”.

According to Aristotle’s definition, Willy Loman would not be classed as a tragic hero. However, Arthur Miller wrote an essay called “Tragedy and the Common Man” which defends Willy’s tragic hero status. Miller claims that “the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity.” In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is ready to, and eventually does, lay down his life to secure his sense of personal dignity therefore in a modern sense he can be seen as a tragic hero. The statement that “Willy is an odd kind of anti-hero” can be justified as the anti-hero is described as “a persona characterized by a lack of “traditional” heroic qualities” and when Willy’s character is compared with the criteria set out by Aristotle, this is indeed the case. A 1950’s audience would have been able to empathize with Willy much more easily than with Oedipus. In fact, Arthur Miller recalls watching members of an audience cry when the curtain came down on *Death of a Salesman*. One could argue that Willy Loman is a modern hero with whom the modern world can relate to which would make him seem to be even more of a tragic hero than Oedipus who lived in an era which was so different.

Both Oedipus and Willy Loman have several weaknesses and some of these can be interpreted as their “fatal flaws” or hamartia, as Aristotle calls them. These weaknesses serve to highlight the humanity of both characters but for different reasons. Oedipus’s weaknesses make him more than a king in a world where power was everything and Willy’s weaknesses make him more than a number in the American capitalist system. Common weaknesses in these characters are backed by different motivations and manifest themselves in different ways. For example, Willy’s stubbornness in refusing to accept the way of life dictated to him by the capitalist system in America results in him becoming angry and delusional. Oedipus’s refusal to accept the fate handed down to him from the gods results in him leaving what he thought was his real family and fulfilling the prophesy he so greatly feared. Both men share the weakness of shielding themselves from the painful truth; in Willy’s case, his financial problems and his lack of popularity and in Oedipus’s case, the fact that he killed his father and married his mother.

Another important shared weakness is Oedipus’s and Willy’s determination to please others because they want the respect that comes with that. Oedipus,

however, has that respect because he did a noble thing when he left his parents in the hope of saving them and he is now trying to catch his real father's, the King of Thebes's, killer so that he can save the city from the famine. Willy is not capable of making such grand gestures because he is not high enough up on the social food chain to do so. He does not have the respect that Oedipus does; even his own son, Biff, does not respect him. He tries to gain respect by earning lots of money and using the success of his sons to impress people. This aspect links with the characters' nobility of character; Oedipus gained the position of King by unknowing killing his own father and solving the Sphinx's riddle, Willy devoted his life to working hard and in the end had nothing to show for it. This makes an audience feel more sympathetic towards Willy and goes some way to backing up the idea that he could be seen as more of a tragic hero than Oedipus.

Willy Loman could be said to be more of a tragic hero than Oedipus for a number of reasons. Willy dies because he needs to provide financially for his family but the treatment he has received because of the American capitalist system leaves him with only the option of killing himself and leaving his family with the insurance. In contrast, Oedipus's self-mutilation seems pointless and his flaws and incest tarnish his nobility. Modern audiences empathize with the "common man" and the issues he deals with, such as; financial difficulty, moral issues and mental illness whereas not many audiences can empathize with an ancient Greek myth about a man who murdered his father and married his mother.

However, Oedipus could be said to be more of a tragic hero because the idea that Willy died for his beliefs is not well-founded. Didn't Willy commit suicide to escape the world he could not cope with and for financial gain? He took an easy way out and received no respect for it; only his family and neighbour came to the funeral in the Requiem of Death of a Salesman. Exile was worse than death for Oedipus; not only did he have to cope with losing his wife because of what he did, he had to lose his children as well. It takes tremendous strength of character to live with the shame Oedipus has and for this he is respected.

In conclusion, both Willy Loman and Oedipus are portrayed as tragic heroes, albeit in very different times where the important things in society are worlds apart. The answer to the question of whether Oedipus or Willy make a more credible tragic hero is a matter of opinion as both characters possess some of the features of the tragic hero of their time.

