Modern Dramatic Tragedy and Aristotle's Poetics: A Comparison

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MODERN DRAMATIC TRAGEDY AND
ARISTOTLE'S POETICS: A COMPARISON

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
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by
Kimberly John Babcock
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
The requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, October 1987

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Scott Donaldson

Terry Meyers
To

Tuckerman Alexander Babcock

my best friend, who urged me on and sacrificed to follow me. You made it one of the best years of my life.

And to

William T. Lovell

I miss you.
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ABSTRACT

Many scholars argue today that tragedy is no more; that a different (and arguably lesser) conception of man and his place in this world precludes the idea of a protagonist willing to risk his life for something he believes in. This paper refutes that argument by examining the tragic qualities of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, especially as compared to what is virtually universally accepted as a starting point for the study of tragedy: Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Aristotelian heroes lived in courts and palaces and walked among the elite in a formally stratified society. The protagonists of post-19th century tragedies live on the outskirts of wealth in a city where proximity to money defines the informal aristocracy. As exemplified by the Cabots and the Lomans, today's tragic protagonists are "common men." And yet, as this study concludes, these common men are tragic figures by the virtue of their greatness of spirit, their willingness to draw a line beyond which they will not be pushed. Eben Cabot would rather die with the woman he loves than live without her, and Willy Loman attempts to give death the meaning he could not find in life.

The difference between Aristotelian and modern dramatic tragedy testifies not to a paucity of contemporary tragic vision, but rather to the difference between Aristotle's world and our own.
MODERN DRAMATIC TRAGEDY AND

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS: A COMPARISON
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Attempting to write a precise definition of dramatic tragedy, which would end argument once and for all, is to set oneself up for failure. Most broadly, perhaps one could define the genre as an emotional idiom, but when one aims at specifics, dramatic tragedy becomes a moving target. With time it seems to continually change in outline, at least. However, it does permit a loose-fitting definition. Critics may argue about specifics, but in the end there is a general, if not total, agreement on the canon of works characterized as tragic.

In The Poetics, Aristotle set down a definition of tragedy which has since become a classic. Scholars and students argue over this point and that in his work; however, as a lasting definition of the genre, Aristotle's has met no match. His definition is the standard by which tragedies of all ages and types can be gainfully examined.

This paper focuses such an examination on two modern American tragedies which, though much argued about now, will eventually take their places among the older members of their literary family. Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman are
quintessential modern tragedies. Each is set in a "common man" atmosphere rather than the court (as has become standard since roughly the 19th century), and each stars a protagonist rather than a hero, in the lead role. The difference may seem semantic, but it is primary to an understanding of Aristotelian versus modern tragedy.

Webster's dictionary chronicles in brief the devolution of the hero from a divine being to an ordinary man: "hero 1a: a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability... 2b: the central figure in an event or period" (Woolf, 536). Eben Cabot and Willy Loman are heroes only in the sense of definition 2B, whereas Oedipus and Antigone, for example, are heroes in the sense of definition 1A. While it might be acceptable to use the same word for both types of characters in exclusive contexts, where it is clear whether one means type 1A or 2B, it is unacceptable to use the word to describe Agamemnon in a context which includes the same word to describe Willy Loman, because people apply definition 1A toward Agamemnon and 2B (a very different definition) toward Willy. To help maintain a sense of the difference, throughout this paper I will refer to the modern lead character as a protagonist, a word without the connotations of superiority implicit in the word "hero."
As Aristotle conceived it, tragedy is an imitation of "noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude," and achieving catharsis "through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents" (Aristotle, Poetics, 11). Unfortunately for all the scholars seeking a definition of tragedy after him, Aristotle did not elaborate on precisely what he meant by "catharsis." While the term is too well-known to ignore completely, it is not central to the progress of this argument, so I will forebear an attempt to define it.

The first "literary principle" of tragedy, according to Aristotle, "and to speak figuratively, the soul of tragedy," is the plot (Aristotle, Poetics, 13). Aristotle defines plot as the most important element or principle of tragedy because tragedy is an imitation of actions, which alone lead to human happiness and misery. Character, to Aristotle the second most important element, gives us quality. But only by acting are we happy or not. "In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action" (Aristotle, Selections, 333). He continues, stating that tragedy is possible without characters, but not without the action of the plot.

Aristotle attempts to define an ideal tragic hero as someone for whom a tragic fall would somehow be just. He writes:
Since the plots of the best tragedies must be complex, not simple, and the plot of tragedy must be an imitation of pitiable and fearful incidents, ...it is clear, first of all, that unqualifiedly good human beings must not appear to fall from good fortune to bad; for that is neither pitiable nor fearful; it is, rather, repellent. (Poetics, 21)

Aristotle says further that a wholly evil man cannot be the subject of a successful tragedy, since his downfall would not be pitiable, as much as deserved. The ideal tragic figure, according to Aristotle, would be a moderately good man who falls from prosperity to adversity not through vice, but through "some great error or frailty," or hamartia (Kimmey, Brown, 440). He seems to argue that unlike the misfortune of the thoroughly good man, the fall of the moderately good man is not morally repellent, because the disaster is the result of his own error. While Aristotle roughly defines the type of character necessary to achieve catharsis in tragedy, he says nothing of the need for a king, in particular, as a tragic hero.

Aristotle discusses "recognition" as an element of a tragic plot, as a change from "ignorance to knowledge." The most effective recognition, he writes, is the one which occurs simultaneously with the reversal in fortune from prosperity to adversity. Oedipus Rex is an example of this.
Aristotle maintains that such a recognition, or anagnorisis, "will evoke pity and fear, and we have defined tragedy as an imitation of actions of this type; and furthermore, happiness and misery will appear in circumstances of this type" (Aristotle, Poetics, 19-20).

In short, Aristotle defines tragedy as imitation of a noble and complete action, representing pitiable and fearful incidents. Plot, character, and speech are the most important principles of Aristotelian tragedy: the plot must be the story of a hero's fall fromfortune to misfortune, an element of which is the hero's ultimate recognition of his situation; the character of a tragic hero must be that of a moderately good man with some faults, or "tragic flaws"; speech must reveal the hero's character by revealing what he chooses and rejects. Classical tragedy always presents a conflict, such as that Agamemnon faced in being responsible to thousands of soldiers idly waiting to sail for Troy. The conflict, as Burton Raphael writes in The Paradox of Tragedy, lies between "inevitable power, which we may call necessity, and the reaction to necessity of self-conscious effort" (25).

With all due respect, I number myself among Aristotle's critics. His argument that the soul of tragedy is the plot does not convince me. It seems to me that people's characters prompt them to respond one way or another to given circumstances; therefore the action of any play
depends wholly on the characters of its players, who are integral to it rather than, as Aristotle writes, incidental. Had Oedipus not been so stubborn and determined, he would have quit searching for the truth of his identity, and the plot of the play would have been entirely different.

In response to Aristotle's assertions about the type of character who can be the subject of a tragedy, Raphael asks, if "the cause of the hero's downfall is expressly stated to be not vice or depravity, but 'error,' [then] where, we may ask, is the justice of that?" (20). An answer to Raphael lies in interpreting Aristotle's use of the word *hamartia* to mean what we now call the "tragic flaw," an innate frailty or an error in judgement, as in the case of Agamemnon's rashness in promising to comply with the gods' any wish if only they would start the winds to fill the Argon fleet's sails. Understanding Agamemnon's anxiety to get his ships out of harbor, we can sympathize with his promise to the gods at the same time that we feel his was a rash move; the price he pays in consequence for his thoughtlessness is just, because the value of Iphigeneia's life is commensurate with the rashness of his promise. It is a necessary consequence, because in a tragic world, man is held accountable for his actions.

There has been a great deal of critical argument about the practice of moving tragedy from the court to the
surroundings of commoners. Though he later recanted, Joseph Wood Krutch is so eloquent and well-spoken that his argument does well as a representation of his own thought (at least at one point in his career) and that of those who agree with him. He wrote about those characters suitable for tragedy:

The tendency to lay the scene of a tragedy at the court of a king is not the result of any arbitrary convention but of the fact that the tragic writers believed easily in greatness just as we believe easily in meanness. To Shakespeare, robes and crowns and jewels are the garments most appropriate to man because they are the fitting outward manifestation of his inward majesty, but to us they seem absurd because the man who bears them has, in our estimation, so pitifully shrunk. (Temper, 133)

Actually, the importance of a king or other courtier as the central figure in a tragedy lies not in the playwright's ability or lack of ability to envision the common man as a great figure. As Eva Figes points out in her book, Tragedy and Social Evolution, in societies which recognized kingship, the king was appreciated not only as the political figurehead of that society, but also as the moral and religious figurehead. He could usually trace his lineage to a god, which placed him conveniently as a mediator between
the gods and his people. The king as a tragic figure also embodied the welfare of his nation, and thus provided a perfectly logical, adequate figure around which to center a drama which embodies the central belief of a community. If tragedy is the story of the fall from prosperity to adversity of the hero, then a king provided a suitable hero not because of his supposed greatness so much as because he had prosperity to lose, which the peasants did not, and because his welfare was directly related to the welfare of his people, so his misfortune or misconduct could appear to explain the misfortune of his people. This concept is explicit in the tragedy of _Oedipus Rex_, for example, in which the crimes of the king bring a plague to Thebes.

Krutch is an eloquent exponent of classical tragedy, but his argument (and that of his critical fellows) for kings as the central figures in tragedies confines the genre too much. The concept of a tragic hero can exist without the context of kings. By Aristotle's definition, the plot in a tragedy outweighs the importance of the characters. Today, the constraint of writing tragedies centered only around the court would probably only damage the audience's reception of the tragedy rather than enhance it. Such a convention in a modern play would take the play's action too far from the audience for them to feel any fellowship with the players. In our democratic society, the concept of a
royalty whose fate directly bears on that of the general population is archaic. But the concept of tragedy is not. 'Modern tragedy' is not, as many scholars would argue, a contradiction of terms. Desire Under the Elms and Death of a Salesman are two among many tragedies written in our time. However, the style of tragic representations has certainly changed since Aristotle's time.

Aristotle sees tragedy as a formal genre. He believes that dramas are dependant for their inclusion in the definition on the action of their plots. I argue that dramas are, rather, dependant upon what Raphael would call the grandeur d'ame of their players -- the greatness of their spirit and their capacity to feel -- for their inclusion among those works defined as tragic. In modern tragedy, as exemplified by Desire Under the Elms and Death of a Salesman, the soul of tragedy is not the plot, but the heart of its players.
CHAPTER TWO
THE TRAGEDY OF DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS

A central figure in any discussion of the new school of American dramatists, O'Neill is also a focal dramatist because his work reveals both remarkable originality and, inevitably, the effect of forces in the world around him (Spiller, Thorp, et al., 1246).

The early nineteen-hundreds in America produced a cultural awakening, with the emergence of such writers as Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, H.L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, and a prodigious sum of creative activity by Eugene O'Neill. Since roughly 1915, the tendency in American drama (and novels) had been toward realism, social satire and social protest, and what was commonly called "continental sophistication" (Spiller, Thorp, et al., 1244). The influence of these tendencies is evident in O'Neill's plays (as in the social criticism of The Hairy Ape), and yet they are peripheral, at best, to his central theme. As Krutch writes,
O'Neill's most persistent theme is what has sometimes been called the theme of "belonging." From the earliest one-act plays...his most nearly heroic figures have always been those who, like...Ephraim Cabot...belong to something larger than themselves which confers dignity and importance on them. ...They are men of heroic stature determined to find in the universe something besides themselves to which they can belong and be loyal. ("American," 118)

In writing Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill strove for a realism that would portray, as Travis Bogard writes, "the psychological essences and primitive mythic forces" at work in modern lives (199). With The Hairy Ape, O'Neill offered the American stage its first "existential tragedy...the product of a controlled theatrical blending of realism and expressionism," but Desire Under the Elms was O'Neill's first play which borrowed from classical Greek technique, as well as — by critical agreement — his finest play of the 1920s (Gelb, 69). While the play has Greek echoes in it, it is not imitative like his later Greek tragedy, Mourning Becomes Electra. But it is equally invested with the classical Greek sense of characters trapped by fate and by an Aristotelian conception of the combination of elements that make a good tragedy.
A brooding atmosphere of necessity and determinism hangs about the play in the "sinister maternity" of two huge elms. O'Neill opens the play with stage directions which, while they tell the reader more than they can possibly show the audience, certainly emphasize the importance of the trees as a symbol throughout the play:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles. (O'Neill, Desire, 136)

The elms cast their brooding presence throughout the play, like a painting covered in a dark veneer. All that happens in the play happens under them, both physically, as they drape over the house, and symbolically, as they represent the dominance of the mother. However, in the context of the play's realistic action and tone, the elms do not function as symbols, either obviously or obliquely, until
the characters in the play become aware of them. Ephraim says "I'm gittin' old, Abbie. I'm gittin' ripe on the bough. It's allus lonesome cold in the house -- even when it's bilin' hot outside. Hain't yew noticed?" (O'Neill, Desire, 166). He is associating the evil he senses in the house with something about the trees. At this point, "their significance becomes clear and psychologically plausible, their symbolism an element of the play's core. They do not...warp the drama's action in order to justify their presence" (Bogard, 204). All the women in this play -- note Jenn's long hair and Min's resemblance to a fruitful Mother Earth -- and particularly Eben's dead mother and Abbie, are in basic harmony with nature, and therefore resemble the elms. As Toernqvist writes,

> Although nature has been suppressed, it cannot remain so for long; finally it takes its revenge on its oppressors; hence the elms come to represent a brooding and ultimately triumphant fate, which operates from without through one of the allies of nature -- Abbie -- and from within through an accumulating guilt demanding atonement. (61)

The action of Desire Under the Elms takes place in three days, one in the summer, one in the fall, and one in the spring. Each act follows the course of the day, from
late afternoon until the following dawn. The unity of the setting and the control of the action afford the play an approximation of classical unities of action, place, and time. Aristotle comments that as an imitation of action, the story must represent one action, "a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transpositional or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole" (Aristotle, Selections, 336). The play also shares the general pattern of the American folk drama as it had developed in the 1920s, a conventionalized "action, character[s] and belief that became for O'Neill...one form of theatrical language" (Bogard, 206). Bogard writes:

The folk play centered thematically on the response of the characters to the land on which they lived. Close to the soil, their identities and destinies are shaped by a force they sensed moving in the earth. The influence of the land was shown in many ways, in the depiction of the hardship that comes when the land turns sterile or in the joy that the land in springtime brings to its people. Most frequently, the significance of the land was made clear by means of a character whose responsiveness to the earth served to bring into the range of consciousness the nature of the environmental forces that shape men's destinies. (206)
Desire Under the Elms fits into this pattern perfectly. Ephraim conceives of the earth as the source of his salvation. Eben, while desiring it, feels dislocated on the farm because of his father's presence. As the youngest male on the farm, Eben must take a traditionally feminine role of working in the kitchen, where he can set down no roots. Abbie is a stranger to the farm who longs to find a home: all these elements fit the folk theatrical tradition. Incest, violence,crudity, and adultery are all potential elements of the tradition, and, as Bogard points out, "in its thematic exploration of the nature of a 'hard' and an 'easy' God, the play sees the land both as fertile and as sterile, as giving blessing and as demanding cruel service" (Bogard, 207). The characters' relationship to the earth in this play is more than reciprocal, for certainly, as much as the Cabots own their farm, they are owned by it.

By using the conventional pattern for his folk tragedy, O'Neill somewhat recreated the situation of the classical tragedy, insofar as an audience of frequent theatre-goers could anticipate the action of the play and understand it without the element of surprise. O'Neill's brooding sense of doom prepares those ignorant of the convention for the plot. As Bogard writes, "Surprise blinds perception; suspense is movement toward the known; tension emerges from foreknowledge and expectation of consequence; satisfaction comes in the fulfillment of prediction" (Bogard, 207).
use of this convention allows the playwright to explore the implications of his play without creating new fictions to express his meaning. Indeed, the primary fictions of *Desire Under the Elms* are anything but new: greed, violence, lust, sex, adultery, infanticide. Yet the play remains in the realm of tragedy because these elements are only parts of a much larger frame of reference -- the past and the future.

In O'Neill's play (as in so many of Shakespeare's and Ibsen's and countless others), the past determines the present and shapes the future. As Berlin notes, Eben's role in this play as his mother's avenger is very like Hamlet's role as his father's avenger. Like old King Hamlet, Eben's mother seems (whether she is objectively present or not -- certainly she is psychologically present for Eben and Abbie) to hover about the scenes in *Desire Under the Elms*, whispering "Avenge me!" Eben's mother "acquires a deterministic force as potent as the gods in Greek drama" (Berlin, 75). And like Hamlet, Eben will ultimately die in giving peace to the ghost of his mother.

Desire is the arrow that speeds O'Neill's play along its course. Initially, Eben's brothers see gold in the evening sky, and think of easy riches in California. They have just discovered that their father is returning to the farm with a new wife, thus assuring them of never inheriting the farm. They talk themselves into leaving the farm for the "Golden West," where "they's gold in the fields o'
California" (O'Neill, Desire, 147). They sell their shares in the farm to Eben and head for California. Eben's desire is to own the farm, partly for himself and partly to avenge his mother, to whom he believes the farm rightfully belongs. Ephraim's desire is to outlive Peter and Simeon and Eben, so that he can bequeath his farm to a new, worthy son. When we first see him in the play, he is returning home after several months' absence, with a new wife, whom he hopes will bear him an acceptable heir. Ephraim also desires warmth and company, which two wives have so far failed to provide him. (Eventually he will go to the cows, the only beings on the farm who comfort him.) And Abbie, the new wife, desires a home so badly she marries a 75 year old man to get it. Soon after she arrives, Abbie also has a sexual desire for Eben.

Desire Under the Elms differs from Aristotelian tragedies in its conception: it is a prose play rather than a play of the enhanced language of poetry; and in its style: its characters are rough-hewn farmers of the new world rather than kings and royalty of long-established continents. But Desire Under the Elms is essentially like those works in Aristotelian magnitude and nobility of action. The main characters' passions are as ample as the land they fight for. They have the "grandeur d'ame" of classical heroes. If desire is the arrow that speeds the play, their passion is the bow that lets it fly. At 75
years old, Ephraim seems a Titan, both physically and because of the power of his spirit, his devotion to his God and his land. As the play begins, Eben, long overwhelmed by his father, has a "fierce repressed vitality about him" (O'Neill, Desire, 137). During the course of the play Eben's vitality of spirit will overcome his father's repression. In scene two Eben says, "I'm gittin' stronger. I kin feel [my strength] growin' in me -- growin' and growin' -- till it'll bust out!" (O'Neill, Desire, 144). Peter and Simeon call Eben the spitting image of his father as a younger man. Eben has the potential for all the Titan strength, both spiritual and physical, that his father has.

Eben has a vitality and a need to belong that enlarge the meaning of life on the farm and give it a symbolic quality, thus providing a context for universal themes. As Bogard writes, "Eben's sensitivity is the core of the play's poetic extension beyond simple realism" (Bogard, 209). In the end Eben's loyalty to Abbie, in the face of death, will teach Ephraim, finally, what true love is.

O'Neill's dialogue supports Eben's general poetic perspective, for, semi-coherent as it is, it imitates the rough New England farmer's dialect, and

[I]t emerges under the pressures of the emotions generated in the action as a special and rich language supportive of the play's widest conceptions. It
extends its meaning by overtone and implication to present both the multi-levels of the characters' consciousness and, at the same time, their symbolic significance, welding both particular and general into a tonal pattern that has appropriateness, broad meaning and beauty. (Bogard, 210)

It strikes me that it is precisely O'Neill's "sense of human dignity, his sense of the importance of human passions, his vision of the amplitude of human life" (Krutch, Temper, 120) -- that same sense which motivated Shakespeare to create such characters as Hamlet and Othello -- which motivated the creation of Ephraim and Eben in Desire Under the Elms. Both characters have tragic proportions.

Ephraim Cabot spends little time actually on the stage, and yet his persona is an omnipresent background to the play. A modern variation of a classical theme, Ephraim certainly has tragic magnitude (though in the final analysis I do not interpret him as the tragic hero of the play). Ephraim is a man who feels he belongs to something larger than himself, something

[O]utside his own being, some 'spirit not himself' -- be it God, Nature, or that still vaguer thing called a Moral Order -- [which] joins him in the emphasis which he places upon this or that and confirms him in his
feeling that his passions and his opinions are important. (Krutch, Temper, 499)

Indeed, Ephraim has made a life out of attempting to live up to the God of his definition. O'Neill describes him as having immense strength, and even at 75, "his face is as hard as if it were hewn out of a boulder" (O'Neill, Desire, 155). We hear Ephraim say, "God o' the old! God o' the lonesome!" (O'Neill, Desire, 161). He explains to Abbie, "God hain't easy...God's hard...God's in the stones!...I'd made things grow out o' nothin' -- like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It was hard an' He made me hard fur it" (O'Neill, Desire, 172). Ephraim strives to become as much like that God as he can. He seems to have a covenant with his God to try to conduct his life as a human replication of Him. Certainly he succeeds, at least by the fact of his legendary physical strength. A septuagenarian, he can still beat his twenty-five year old son in a fight, and out-last the fiddler who tries to accompany his wild dancing. But while Ephraim is true to his strong God, what about his God of the lonely? Already Ephraim has out-lived two wives, of whom he says to Abbie, "She never knewed me...I was allus lonesome. She died...I tuk another wife -- Eben's Maw...It was lonesomer n' hell with her. After a matter o' sixteen odd years, she died" (O'Neill, Desire, 173). Ephraim's inability to be faithful
to his God of the lonely -- to be hard and lonely like his God rather than trying to find succor from loneliness -- is perhaps the "tragic flaw" which precipitates the ensuing tragedy.

We have in Ephraim a character of heroic stature by the virtues of his striving to belong to something greater than himself, his sheer physical strength, and his indefatigable spirit to build a productive farm out of rock-laden soil. He is, as Aristotle tells us he should be, a moderately good man, with faults we could reasonably call his tragic flaws, and his story could be explained as that of a fall from fortune to adversity. But Aristotle wants, as an element of the plot, the hero's ultimate recognition of his situation. If we take Ephraim as our tragic hero in Desire Under the Elms, how shall we define his anagnorisis?

Ephraim learns that Abbie has killed the child. He swears, "I'll live t' see ye hung! I'll deliver ye up t' the judgment o' God an' the law! I'll git the Sheriff now" (O'Neill, Desire, 201). Abbie tells him Eben has already gone to inform the Sheriff against her. Ephraim responds, "Waal, I'm thankful fur him savin' me the trouble. I'll git t' wuk." Then he changes his mind. "He ought t' been my son, Abbie," he says, referring to the child. "Ye'd ought t' loved me. I'm a man. If ye'd loved me, I'd never told no Sheriff on ye no matter what ye did, if they was t' brile me alive!" (O'Neill, Desire, 201).
Ephraim flip-flops in his distress, deciding initially that Eben's telling the Sheriff about Abbie is one more example of his unworthiness and weakness. However, when Eben returns from the Sheriff's office, Ephraim literally knocks him down in a violent display of contempt. "Good fur ye! A prime chip o' yer Maw ye be!" (O'Neill, Desire, 202). He threatens to kill Eben for betraying Abbie if he stays on the farm after the Sheriff has gone.

Now we see Ephraim's enlightenment begin. First he lets loose all his stock, having decided to take the hidden money and follow Peter and Simeon to California in search of gold. Discovering that the money is gone, however, he snaps back to his former self, remembering his covenant with his hard God. With Eben and Abbie gone, he will work the farm alone, he decides, and, he says, "It's a-goin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it war afore -- ...Waal -- what d'ye want? God's lonesome, hain't He? God's hard and lonesome!" (O'Neill, Desire, 205). Ephraim finally realizes that relief from loneliness is not for him. Being true to his God requires physical strength, grit, and loneliness.

Ephraim also begins to learn about "how great and resplendent a thing love could be" (Krutch, Temper, 496). When Eben insists on taking equal blame with Abbie for killing the child, a glimpse of this affirmation in the face of total loss moves Ephraim to a grudging admiration for his son. "Purty good -- fur yew!" (O'Neill, Desire, 205). For
the first time, Ephraim sees before him an example of the difference between mere physical closeness, which seems all he has been able to achieve with women, and real love. Realizing as he now does that loneliness is a part of his covenant with God, Ephraim will probably not take another wife. But the vision of true, selfless love his son affords him is nonetheless valuable to him. Arguably, it has enriched his life, for it is better to understand true love, finally, than never at all. Enlightened as Ephraim may now be, however -- both as to the nature of his covenant with God and the nature of true love -- he cannot be considered the tragic protagonist of the play because, unlike the tragic heroes and protagonists before him, he draws no conclusion from his experience, particularly no tragic conclusion. The events of the play did not lead him to a tragic perception or to a tragic sacrifice.

Though he lacks the demanding presence of Ephraim, Eben does draw a tragic conclusion from the events of the play, and he achieves a tragic perspective of life when he makes the greatest sacrifice for love that one can make. I argue, therefore, that Eben Cabot is the tragic protagonist of Desire Under the Elms. If Eben belongs to something larger than himself, it is the desire to own the farm, free of the threats his father taunts him with. The memory of his mother and his profound need to vindicate the wrongs he
considers Ephraim has done to her inform his yearning for the farm. To vindicate her, Eben feels he must get the farm for his own, because he believes it should rightfully have been hers. He seems to live to "see t' it my Maw gits some rest an' sleep in her grave" (O'Neill, Desire, 143). He is waiting for the right time to confront his father. "I'm gittin' stronger. I kin feel it growin' in me -- growin' an growin' -- till it'll bust out -- !" (O'Neill, Desire, 144).

Peter and Simeon are about to sign Eben's contract of sale and depart for California, when Eben bursts out, "It's Maw's farm agen! It's my farm! Them's my cows! I'll milk my durn fingers off fur cows o' mine!" (O'Neill, Desire, 151). Simeon and Peter reply more to each other than to Eben. "Like his Paw." "Dead spit'n' image!" (O'Neill, Desire, 151). This is significant because it emphasizes how much Eben is indeed like Ephraim. Eben has the same spirit, the same iron determination and strength of will to make a life out of this rocky farm that Ephraim does. He, too, sees the farm as symbolic of something bigger than he is. His mother's spirit lives with him and he will give his life to the farm to vindicate her.

Eben is sexually attracted to Abbie, and he believes, or convinces himself, that by sleeping with his father's wife he can help redress his mother's suffering. In the parlor ("a repressed room like a tomb," according to O'Neill's stage directions (O'Neill, Desire, 176)), where
his mother was laid out after her death, Eben and Abbie meet. Abbie wants to possess this room -- the last in the house which is not yet hers -- and yet when she enters it, she does not possess it. O'Neill tell us, "A change as come over [Abbie]. She looks awed and frightened now, ready to run away" (O'Neill, Desire, 176). When Eben joins her, she says to him, "When I fust come in -- in the dark -- they seemed somethin' here" (O'Neill, Desire, 177). Eben says, simply, "Maw." Maintaining the facade of a mother-son relationship, Eben and Abbie talk away the ghost of Eben's mother.

EBEN. (in a whisper) Seems like Maw didn't want me t' remind ye.

ABBIE. (excitedly) I knowed, Eben! It's kind t' me! It don't b'ar me no grudges fur what I never knowed an' couldn't help!

EBEN. Maw b'ars him a grudge.

ABBIE. Waal, so does all o' us.

EBEN. Ay-eh. (with passion) I does, by God!

ABBIE. (taking one of his hands in hers and patting it) Thar! Don't git riled thinkin' o' him. Think o' yer Maw who's kind t' us. Tell me about yer Maw, Eben.

EBEN. They hain't nothin' much. She was kind. She was good.
ABBIE. (putting one arm over his shoulder. He does not seem to notice -- passionately) I'll be kind an' good t' ye!

EBEN. Sometimes she used t' sing fur me.

ABBIE. I'll sing fur ye!

EBEN. This was her hum. This is my farm.

ABBIE. This is my hum! This is my farm!

EBEN. He married her t' steal 'em. She was soft an' easy. He couldn't 'preciate her.

ABBIE. He can't 'preciate me!

EBEN. He murdered her with his hardness.

ABBIE. He's murderin' me!

As Eben bursts into a fit of tears, Abbie throws her arms around him, "with wild passion." There is a "horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love" in her voice when she cries, "Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! ...I'll kiss ye pure Eben -- same 's if I was a Maw t' ye..." They kiss in a "restrained" manner, which quickly changes into uncontrolled passion (O'Neill, Desire, 177-78).

At this point, Eben and Abbie become lovers. "She kisses him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses" (O'Neill, Desire, 178). But Eben then leaps to his feet, atremble. Abbie tries to convince Eben his mother wants him to love Abbie. Eben stammers, "Ah-eh. I feel -- mebbe she -- but -- I can't
figger out -- why -- when ye've stole her place -- here in her hum -- in the parlor whar she was --" Abbie answers fiercely, "She knows I love ye!" As though a light comes on in Eben's head, he understands how sleeping with his father's wife can give redress to his mother. To those readers who perceive Eben's mother as an objective presence, Eben's rationale for sleeping with Abbie must be read as some sort of message from the ghost. For those who perceive Eben's mother as a part of Eben's imagination, his rationale must seem a mere justification of his lust. "I see it! I sees why. It's her vengeance on him -- so's she kin rest quiet in her grave!" (O'Neill, Desire, 179). While Ephraim sleeps with his cows in the barn, his son and his wife sleep with each other in the parlor.

On the night of a dance held at the Cabot's farm to celebrate the birth of Abbie's son about ten months later, Ephraim heads for the barn, feeling at odds and inexplicably uneasy. He meets Eben, who stands gazing at the sky wondering (probably) how to resolve the lie about the child's parentage. Both on edge, they get into an argument about the ownership of the farm. In a rage, Ephraim repeats to Eben what Abbie told him almost a year before.

Yewr farm! God A'mighty! If ye wa'n't a born donkey ye'd never own stick nor stone on it, specially now
arter him bein' born. It's his'n, I tell ye -- his'n arter I die -- but I'll live a hundred jest t' fool ye all -- an' he'll be growed then -- yewr age a'most! Ye think ye kin git 'round that someways, do ye? Waal, it'll be her'n, too -- Abbie's -- ye won't git 'round her -- she knows yer tricks -- she'll be too much fur ye -- she wants the farm fer her'n -- she was afeerd o' ye -- she told me ye was sneakin' 'round tryin' t' make love t' her t' git her on yer side...ye...ye mad fool, ye! (O'Neill, Desire, 191)

Tricked by a sort of Shakespearean set of coincidences into a warped sense of Abbie's love for him, as Romeo and Juliet just miss the several messengers on their way to bring them news of each other, Eben is convinced by his father's untimely recitation of Abbey's disdain and distrust of him that she never did love him, but only acted so to get the farm from him. Despairing, Eben does not -- cannot -- hear Abbie's explanation of Ephraim's tale. "Eben, listen -- ye must listen -- it was long ago -- afore we done nothin' -- yew was scornin' me -- going' t' see Min -- when I was lovin' ye -- an I said it t' him t' git vengeance on ye!" (O'Neill, Desire, 193). Too distraught to hear her words, bewildered and feeling utterly betrayed, Eben says of the child, "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit! I wish I'd never set eyes on him! It's him -- yew
havin' him -- a-purpose t' steal -- that's changed everythin'!" (O'Neill, Desire, 194).

Abbie takes the suggestion literally, and, desperate to prove that her lust for Eben has grown into love, she kills the child. Eben's discovery of Abbie's misdeed precipitates his tragic anagnorisis. Dazed with horror, he stumbles to the Sheriff's office to bring the law to Abbie. But then he returns to her.

I woke [the Sheriff] up. I told him. He says, wait 'till I git dressed. I was waiting. I got to thinking' o' yew. I got to thinkin' how I'd love ye. It hurt like somethin' was bustin' in my chest an' head. I got t' cryin'. I knowed sudden I loved ye yet, an' allus would love ye! (O'Neill, Desire, 202)

At the reversal of his fortunes, Eben has made a discovery -- and in Aristotle's words, discovery is simply a "change from ignorance to knowledge" (Aristotle, Selections, 339). Eben has discovered that his feelings, too, have grown from lust to the finer thing. He suggests to Abbie that they run off into the woods. But she, with a tragic, even Socratic, sense of loyalty to the social covenant she lives by, refuses. "I got t' take my punishment -- t' pay fur my sin," she replies (O'Neill, Desire, 203). Eben immediately responds that he will share whatever her
punishment is with her. He claims he put the idea into her head and therefore is as guilty for killing the child as she. Knowing what admitting his part in the sin will cost, Eben insists on paying it, and for love and honor, casts his fate. O'Neill has crafted here the finest form of discovery, which, according to Aristotle, is "one attended by Peripeties (a reversal of fortune), like that which goes with the Discovery in Oedipus" (Aristotle, Selections, 339). Hence, what Ephraim wished to achieve by telling Eben that Abbie was only using him -- the final dissolution of friendship between Abbie and Eben and the crushing end to Eben's hope of inheriting the farm, seems to work for a while. But ultimately, Ephraim's words bring about the opposite conclusion. Eben and Abbie forfeit their lives and their dreams -- of the farm, a home, and vengeance -- to remain together in death rather than apart in life.

Eben's reaction to his predicament demonstrates a nobility and tragic greatness like that of Antigone. Eben Cabot shows us that indeed, "Love and Honor...are not words but realities" (Krutch, Temper, 496). His willingness to die for these realities -- to pay the ultimate price for allegiance to them -- is a tragic conclusion to a deeper perception of life.
CHAPTER THREE

THE TRAGEDY OF \textit{DEATH OF A SALESMAN}

When \textit{Death of a Salesman} first saw stage lights in 1949, audiences gave it, in the words of John Gassner, an "ecstatic reception." In \textit{Newsweek}, an anonymous review of the Broadway opening called the play "a vivid, emotion-shattering, and deeply moving play that ranks with the best in contemporary American drama." The play swept theatre awards that year, receiving the drama award of the New York Newspaper guild, the Theatre Club's prize medal, the New York Drama Critics' Circle award, the Antoinette Perry Award and, among others, the Pulitzer Prize (Ferres, 14-15).

Notwithstanding all its original success, or perhaps because of it, Miller's \textit{Death of a Salesman} has been argued about since its debut: is it a satisfying modern tragedy or a melodramatic exercise in pathos, or do its strength and weaknesses place it somewhere between these extremes? Is Willy Loman heroic or pathetic?

Miller himself has to be reckoned with as a critic of his work, having written a respectable number of articles in an attempt to defend the common man, i.e., Willy Loman, as a
suitable figure for tragic drama. "Tragedy and the Common Man," for instance, appeared soon after *Death of a Salesman* opened in New York in February. Miller writes,

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. *(Essays, 3)*

Miller's belief in the common man as apt subject for tragedy is corroborated not only by Eugene O'Neill, but also by the literary voices of novelists such as Melville, Hardy, and Tolstoy, as well as by poets such as Dickinson, Yeats, and Plath. Miller seems to be saying something very like what O'Neill said in response to Freudian interpretations of his plays: the psychoanalytical ideas in *Death of a Salesman* (and O'Neill's plays) are self-evident, especially to those who study human motivations, and the same plays would have been written if Freud had never lived. The dignity of the tragic protagonist is central to Miller's vision of the form. He writes:
As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think, 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. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to find his "rightful" position in his society. (Essays, 4)

My disagreement with Miller on this point seems more one of semantics than of theory. What he calls the heroes' dignity I would call in some cases their pride -- as in the case of Creon, who was loathe to rescind his order not from dignity but from stubborn pride -- but in the case of Orestes and Hamlet, for example, dignity is a fine word to sum up why those men are willing to kill after their fathers have been treacherously murdered, and their own positions threatened. These heroes have an inherent dignity to which they will brook few insults.

In tragedy, Miller continues, "the tale always reveals" the hero's "tragic flaw," which need be nothing more than the hero's "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he perceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status" (Essays, 4).

Miller's careful wording defines a broad spectrum of possibilities. Willy seems far from the inherent dignity of
a character such as Oedipus. He seems, rather, to flounder about for a dignified pose. But Miller does not say that the dignity must be inherent. Willy perceives his ineffectiveness as a salesman and Biff's aimlessness as slaps to the face of his rightful status in society.

Many critics, such as George Jean Nathan and Joseph Wood Krutch, have denied any tragic achievement in _Death of a Salesman_. These critics often echo Nathan in his article, "Tragedy," wherein he writes, "Great tragedy is the tragedy of man's mind in strong conflict with the stronger fates; minor tragedy that of mindless man already beaten by them" (Nathan, 679). He continues, in an answer to Miller, that the common man's tragedy, without an investment of "the deceptive jewels of English speech," can be "no more in the temple of dramatic art than the pathetic picture of a lovable idiot lifting his voice against the hurricane of the world" (Nathan, 680).

These comments express a refusal to recognize as tragic a character so different from the classic type. In the end, Willy's anagnorisis is incomplete, so he does not fulfill the requirements necessary in order to qualify as the tragic hero of a play, at least in the Aristotelian sense. Certainly, he presents us with a new and arguably lesser type of protagonist than the classical tragic heroes. Not only is Willy a common man, he is a small man, and this smallness is listed frequently among the "anti-tragic
influences" in textbooks on tragedy. Cohn writes, "aggrandizement of the Common Man is paralleled by reduction of the hero" (Cohn, 86). Goodheart writes, "as the imagination of divinity fails so does the imagination of the self" (Goodheart, 564). And Heilman writes, "When Elmer Rice names a hero Zero..., he gave both expression and impetus to the fashion of accepting smallness as the defining quality of modern man" (Heilman, 11). Heilman explains, "The sense of littleness -- of weakness, incompetence, ... -- is anti-tragic in that it means a one-sided view of reality; it implies no alternative value, and hence none of the tension of the tragic situation" (Heilman, 13). Like glancing blows, all these points just miss the implications of Willy Loman, Common Man, as tragic hero. It simply does not follow that because he is a common man, he lacks the inner room for the "clash of motives and purposes by which the [large] tragic figure is representative of human reality" (Heilman, 13).

As Gassner writes in "The Theatre Arts," Death of a Salesman is "a culmination of all [Miller's] efforts since the 1930s to observe the American scene and trace, as well as evaluate, its effect on character and personal life" (Gassner, 219). The result of those efforts is an understanding of Willy Loman, who struggles as a travelling salesman, a profession which epitomizes the American social ideal: self employment and a manifest destiny to go to the
buying frontiers, preferably earning wealth along the way. But Willy has bought into an ideal he cannot believe in. Selling does not fulfill him. It provides no frame for him to depend on, lean on. It gives him only an emptiness. Hence, Willy's tragic voice is a despairing cry for meaning, for something larger than himself to belong to, an aspiration for the liberation of his spirit and energy, a search for an answer in a world where what used to be a living, coherent order, connecting man and the world, has become, ultimately, an abstract order (Williams, 50). In post-1930s America, the chaos of relative values has replaced the order of God and religion, and even that of the extended family on the farm, where the fruit of one's labor were put on the table, seen in a new barn, and in the eyes of one's children who would perpetuate one's ideals by staying on the land to raise their own children. Miller is perfectly conscious of this; it is, as he puts it, "the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world" (Huftel, 104). In Miller's tragedy, we have moved from a deeply religious agrarian society to an industrialized society largely without God. In this brave new world, money and what it can buy are paramount, and we have gone from the heroic position of individual liberator, the aspiring self against a given order, to a tragic position of the self against the self (Williams, 100).
By the time we first see Willy, he seems lost and exhausted. But his exhaustion is psychological rather than physical. Miller reveals Willy's earlier vigor, primarily through Linda. If a bit didactic, Linda still has a good point:

The man is exhausted. ...A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trade-mark, and now in his old age they take his salary away... He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one know him any more, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it's his pay? How long can that go on? How long? ...And you tell me he has not got character? (Miller, Salesman, 51)

In the first 35 pages of the play, Miller establishes several important aspects of Willy's character. Through Willy's speech and a complex plot, which switches back and forth between past and present, Miller reveals both events and Willy's character, and the choices he has made in his life. Early in the play, Miller also establishes the role
Linda will play throughout the drama. Linda plays a role in *Death of a Salesman* reminiscent of the Chorus in the *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus uses the Chorus in *Agamemnon* to raise the action of the play to a higher plane of significance through foreshadowing. The Chorus' utterances are superior to the action (Kitto, 83), and in Miller's play, Linda, though naturally not as perspicacious as the Chorus, and though speaking in exposition rather than in the choral ode, provides both background and foreshadowing for *Death of a Salesman*. In the beginning of Miller's drama, Linda asks Willy, almost immediately upon his arrival home, "You didn't smash the car, did you?" (Miller, *Salesman*, 6). Linda knows what to ask: this has happened before. In the same way, Linda is the one who informs the audience, by pointing out to the boys Willy's awkward contraption in the basement, that Willy has been contemplating suicide. *Death of a Salesman* was a new plot in 1949; however, by such foreshadowing Miller reveals the ultimate ending, and disarms it of distracting surprise. (The revelation in Boston is a surprise, certainly, but it opens our eyes to the strain in Willy's and Biff's relationship, rather than blinding our perception to the rest of the plot.)

As the play opens, Willy is irritated at Biff, his 34-year-old drifter of a son. Trying to assuage the rift between husband and son, Linda says, "I think if he finds himself, then you'll both be happier and not fight any more"
Willy the salesman responds, "How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand?" But Willy, for all his seeming disdain of farming, will open Act Two with an opposite sentiment. "You wait, kid," he will say to Linda, "before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens..." (Miller, *Salesman*, 65). Willy goes on angrily about Biff, blaming his drifting on sloth, calling him a "lazy bum" on page 10. About six lines later, he says, "And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff -- he's not lazy." Thus, in the first pages it becomes quite clear that Willy is -- at least sporadically -- senile. Willy's mind is "all confusion; a contradiction of fact, dream, and longing entangled and inescapable" (Huftel, 103). In extreme moments, he often talks out loud to the imaginary figures of his sons, or his dead brother Ben. On page 24 he has slipped into such a reverie, and through it we see Willy Loman as admired father of two athletic sons. Playful, full of loving advice, Willy seems to support his sons, particularly Biff, in every enterprise. Rather than scolding Biff for stealing a football, he quickly makes an excuse for the theft -- that Biff has to practice with a regulation ball, after all.

He tells his sons, "Tell you a secret, boys. Don't breathe it to a soul. Someday I'll have my own business,
and I'll never have to leave home any more." Happy responds, "Like Uncle Charley, heh?"

"Bigger than Uncle Charley!" Willy says. "Because Charley is not -- liked. He's liked, but he's not -- well liked" (Miller, *Salesman*, 24).

Willy continues to build himself up as a very well-liked, successful salesman. "The trouble was that three of the stores were half closed for inventory in Boston. Otherwise I woulda broke records," he says to Linda (Miller, *Salesman*, 29). But then another Willy surfaces. Swearing in one mouthful that he will "knock 'em dead next week," Willy says to his wife a moment later, "You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me."

Probably knowing her husband is right, Linda insists that he is wrong. But Willy persists: not only do people not take to him, but they laugh at him -- because he talks too much, he decides instantly, chalking up Charley's success to his laconicism.

Willy sees his brother as a paradigm, saying of Ben, "That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate!" (Miller, *Salesman*, 35). In trying to understand the difference between his life and others', he assumes that in order to be successful one must be rich and well liked. But he has no conception of the character it takes to be well-liked, and so in a sort of metaphor for Biff's geographical drifting, Willy drifts in and out of different
personalities, speaking and acting in whatever manner he thinks will make people like him. In the space of a few minutes, Willy tells Biff to be serious at job interviews, in order to be liked, and then tells him to crack plenty of jokes. A deeply troubled man, he usually deludes himself that except for circumstances beyond his control, he would break all selling records. Though the audience recognizes it, Willy probably cannot admit to himself that he can only barely succeed as a salesman if he sleeps his way into buyers' offices. The Woman says on page 32, "I'll put you right through to the buyers."

Willy is an intriguing figure to examine in the light of Aristotle's definition of what sort of character would suit as a tragic hero. Aristotle writes, "This would be a person who is neither perfect in virtue and justice, nor one who falls into misfortune through vice and depravity; but rather, one who succumbs through some miscalculation" (Aristotle, Poetics, 22). Willy does both. Certainly his adultery is a vice. But at the center of his problems is his miscalculation of his own identity, and a miscalculated image of the style of life that will sustain his soul. Willy is ignorant of his true identity. Lacking the internal framework from which he could derive direction for life, he lives in a world which offers him no external framework, in a world of ethical and moral chaos, where one son is a kleptomaniac and the other has a penchant for
sleeping with engaged women before going to their wedding ceremonies. Willy searches outside of himself for answers, and does not find them. Certainly, struggling to find some moral or ethical order is as tragic as an Oedipus struggling against a given moral order.

Willy reveals much about himself through his talks with imaginary brother Ben. He returns again and again to Ben throughout the play as an example of success. On page 80 the two of them are "talking" again. Ben says, "There's a new continent at your doorstep, William. You could go out rich. Rich!" Willy replies, "We'll do it here, Ben! You hear me? We're gonna do it here!" This statement, plus the fact that Willy never does sell his house while apartments sprout like tomato plants around it (perhaps increasing its monetary value, definitely decreasing its livability), are indications of Willy's tragic flaw -- that of being untrue to himself, of absorbing the base values around him which, while they occupy the superficial Willy, only numb the real man, the farmer and the carpenter deep inside.

Willy realizes that his life has been a failure, and grows, in the face of his inability to earn his minimum needs as a travelling salesman, even less able to control his life, less able to gain the esteem -- of others as well as himself -- that he has long been searching for. He contemplates suicide. Significantly, he does not leave hints around the house which he knows will be found out, so
that he will be the center of sympathetic attention. Willy wants respect, not pity. He looks over his life and sees that he does not have, and will not get such respect. He has not been able to control the conditions of his life, because in the first place he chose values foreign to himself. He sees himself as a failure as a salesman, and as a father, since neither of his boys turned out like he wanted them to (and as it seemed they had potential to). He can no longer grow plants in the garden because surrounding apartment buildings block the sun from his yard. He does not believe Biff loves him, and he desperately wants Biff's love and admiration. Hence, Willy follows Miller's "general rule" of tragedy, and lays down his life in an ultimate effort to secure, once and for all, his personal dignity.

Willy reviews his life and concludes finally that it would be more cowardly to continue than to take his own life, and provide for his family in death what he could not in life. In Willy's search for an order in life, he bumps up against a "rich and well-liked is successful" ethic that is anathema to the real man inside, who is striving, instead, to maintain his dignity and earn self-esteem from a satisfying vocation. When he realizes he can earn neither in life, he decides to preserve the shreds of his dignity, at least, in death.

But what of Aristotle's general rules of tragedy? Miller takes some care to show that Willy's decision to
commit suicide is the result of what Aristotle would call "hamartia" or an error in judgement, coupled with a heroic determination to win, at last, what he has been searching for so long and in vain.

On page 119, Willy talks through his decision with imaginary Ben. He says, "A man can't go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something... Remember, it's a guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition."

Loman is thinking of how his wife has suffered, and wants to ease her financial worries at last. Ben replies that "It's called a cowardly thing, William," and Willy counters with a very important statement, because it summarizes his attitude toward himself and his desperation to escape what he has made himself. "Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?" Willy sinks from this high point to dreams about who will come to his funeral, as though a crowd of bereaved salesmen peering into his coffin would give redress to his failed life. But he makes his point. When Ben, still considering the proposition, says, "But you've got to be sure you're not making a fool of yourself" (Miller, Salesman, 120), he hits the would-be carpenter's nail right on the head. Willy has been making a fool of himself, and he knows it. He knows he will continue to. He has one way out. If Willy, like Ibsen's Rosmer, had been able to say, "There is no judge over us, and therefore we must do justice upon ourselves" (Ibsen,
he would have achieved true tragic stature. But he does not, and cannot, say that. Willy's suicide is not a conviction of his own guilt and the necessary retribution he must pay. Rather, because he deludes himself until the very end about his family's getting $20,000 in insurance (which is not at all certain), and further that money will solve his family's problems, his suicide remains only a partial recognition of his true circumstances in life -- and in death. He recognizes that continued life means continued pitiful ineffectiveness; correct. But in deluding himself about the insurance money and its efficacy, he falls short of Aristotelian discovery or anagnorisis.

Joseph Wood Krutch remarks that Death of a Salesman is not only not cheerful, but that it ends "with what looks less like a tragic affirmation than like a simple confession of defeat" (Nathan, 123). Few tragedies could be called cheerful, and Krutch errs in perceiving Willy's death as the end of the play. As Williams points out, "Not so many works that we call tragedies in fact end with the destruction of the hero" (Williams, 55). In most tragedies (and in particular, Aristotelian tragedies), certainly the protagonist is destroyed, but that is the penultimate point in the tragedy. As Williams writes,

Some new distribution of forces, physical or spiritual, normally succeeds the death. In Greek tragedy this is
ordinarily a religious affirmation, but in the words or presence of the chorus, which is then the ground of its social continuity. In Elizabethan tragedy it is ordinarily a change of power in the state, with the arrival of a new, uncommitted or restored Prince. There are many factual variations of this reintegrative action, but their general function is common. (Williams, 55)

This is certainly the case with Miller's play. For ultimately, Miller ends Death of a Salesman with regeneration, life, and hope, all summed up in Biff Loman. Biff is searching, like Willy, for that something larger than he. Something to make a life's work. Something to belong to. He is searching for the possibility of fulfillment, and freedom from the net of self-destruction he saw his father die in, and sees Happy stumbling blindly toward. Biff's grandeur d'âme lies in his continuing faith that there is a life and an order worth searching for. After wandering, confused, for thirteen years, Biff still believes that if he keeps searching, he will find that grail -- inner satisfaction. Biff's greatness of spirit lies in his willingness, finally, to denounce city values and glamour for something more meaningful to him. And his greatness of spirit lies in his insistence on fighting Happy and Linda, if need be, in his attempts to make Willy
understand him. His anagnorisis is a gradual, rather than instantaneous, enlightenment.

In the years since high school, Biff has drifted from job to job, state to state. He has spent some time in jail, some time on various ranches. He says to Happy,

It always turns out the same, I just realized it lately. ...It's why I came home now, I guess, because I realized it. This farm I work on, it's spring there now, see? And they've got about fifteen new colts. There's nothing more inspiring or -- beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. ...And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not gettin' anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin' my future. That's why I came running home. And now...I don't know what to do with myself. (Miller, *Salesman*, 16)

Biff, in returning home, has fallen into his father's trap by letting 'big-city values' allure him with promises of easy living and riches. Obviously, he loves the ranching life. The dichotomy of his yearnings pull him back and forth between city and ranch -- between the glossy promise of wealth and the more profound but unglamourous feeling of
inner satisfaction which would come from doing something he enjoys and believes in. Willy suppressed the country-boy in himself. It seems that Biff will too. But Biff, like Oedipus, is searching for the truth. He waivers on the edge of understanding. He says petulantly to Happy, "They've laughed at Dad for years, and you know why? Because we don't belong in the nuthouse of a city! We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or -- or carpenters!" (Miller, *Salesman*, 55).

But Happy has other ideas -- plans for immediate success and riches. Biff, blinded again by the vision of easy wealth, takes Happy up on the idea of "The Loman Brothers," and goes to see his old employer Bill Oliver about helping finance the venture. At this meeting, humiliated by Oliver's reception, Biff leans further toward the edge of understanding.

I saw him for one minute... How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and -- I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk. (Miller, *Salesman*, 97)
In the face of Happy's utter lack of scruples, Biff tries to explain to his father that he can't set up "The Loman Brothers" because Bill Oliver hardly remembered who he was. Finally, after being talked down by Willy, who refuses to see the truth, and contradicted loudly by Happy, who continues to live the lie, Biff capitulates and tells his father "it was just a question of the amount!" (Miller, *Salesman*, 105). But it hurts him to lie to his father. Unlike Happy, who denied his parentage to a fast-track date, Biff loves Willy, and, beginning to understand himself, wants to awaken the sleeping carpenter/farmer within his father. That is why he feels compelled to try again to get through to Willy that he is not the superstar city-sophisticate and business-wiz his father wants to believe his is, or will be. Biff wants his father to understand that if he never earns riches, but learns to find happiness, then that will be the most important success he can have.

I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw -- the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. ...And I said to myself...why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? When all I want is out here, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! (Miller, *Salesman*, 125)
Biff has discovered, or uncovered, his true self. The hard-working, grubby, sweaty rancher or carpenter who does what satisfies him to earn a living -- to make a life. Nothing glamorous, nothing quick or easy. He cannot make Willy understand or accept this. Unlike Happy, who echoes his father's misguided determination ("I'm not licked that easily. The Loman Brothers!"), Biff understands that such falseness to the self is only a slow suicide anyway (Miller, Salesman, 132).

Biff has seen. "There's more of Dad in that platform than there is in a lifetime of selling" (Miller, Salesman, 132). He has lost his father without ever getting through to him; that is his tragedy. Biff replies to Happy's last effort to revive "The Loman Brothers," "I know who I am, kid," (Miller, Salesman, 132). That is his anagnorisis, and the ultimate triumph with which the play ends.
Both the Greeks and the Poet of Job saw heroic suffering as positive and creative, possibly leading to a new ordering of values. Tragedy...stresses irretrievable loss, but the suffering has been set in a relationship -- a structure which shows progression toward values, rather than denial. The heroic suffering makes a difference. If nothing else, those about the hero can see evil and good more clearly, and issues are sharpened as never before. [Tragedy] can lead to growth in the standard virtues of courage, loyalty, and love, and to a level of being undreamt of before. (Sewell, 48-49)

Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller have achieved what many claim no longer has the possibility of existing: the creation of tragedy -- with striking similitude to the description of classical tragedy, above. In a world as different from Aristotle's as it could possibly be -- set adrift from the moral codes and moral order of the Greek world, and lacking the Greek's sense of black and white, which we have foresaken for the grey hues of relative values
-- these two playwrights have created plays which have found
the timeless emotional chord of all audiences, have
re-spoken the idiom in as traditional and yet as fresh a
voice as it could be spoken.

We meet Eben Cabot in a place where lust sits in for
love because none of the Cabots are acquainted with the
greater thing. Ephraim Cabot has had two wives and was
procreative but lonely with both. Peter and Simeon leave
the farm for the gold in California; they lust for wealth
but have little love for the land. It is uncertain whether
Eben's love for the memory of his mother or hatred for his
harsh father drives him more to desire the farm. It is this
desire which informs his initial lust for his father's third
wife, since he believes that by sleeping with Abbey he can
somehow do redress to the sins he thinks Ephraim perpetrated
against his mother.

When Eben realizes that Abbey will most likely die for
killing their child, he discovers, to his peril and triumph,
that his feelings for her have gone far beyond the lust that
brought them together. So deep is his love, indeed, that he
insists on his equal guilt and remains with her, choosing
death with her over life without her. Through the impending
loss of his life and that of his lover's, Eben learns the
meaning of true love (and by his actions, teaches his father
the meaning, also). It is a tragic perception because it
costs Eben his life to learn it; it is triumphant because it
gives to him and his father — gives to the farm — a vision of being only dreamt of before.

Regardless of the homeliness of his attire, in his physical strength, his passion for the land, and truth, Eben is not small. He is big, if for no other reason than his sublime grandeur d'âme, as Raphael would say, the greatness of his spirits. Eben's moral magnitude implies, as Heilman points out, "not success, but range, an embodiment at once of the passions and egotisms that drive men toward disorder, and of responsiveness to the transcendent commands and obligations that create order" (Heilman, 13).

Willy Loman committed suicide in an attempt to give death the meaning he could not find in life. As John Gassner writes in "The Theatre Arts," "the truth is that Willy Loman is cast in a heroic mold because he can feel greatly, even if his thinking could be bounded in a nutshell" (220). Whereas classical tragic heroes struggled against an omnipotent, given moral order (as Antigone and Creon did), the modern tragic hero of Miller's example struggles to find such an order. In our time, perhaps tragedy can portray what Williams calls the tragic victim, rather than the tragic hero. But Biff, unlike his father, refuses to succumb to any victimization, and with Oedipal persistence, digs to the bottom of his self perception to learn the truth about himself and his father. He comes to understand that real loyalty to Willy means telling him even
uncomfortable truths, and through watching his father die, learns why Willy's life was a failure, and learns how to go about achieving what his father died lacking -- a level of being they had only dreamt of before. In Biff's final recognition, Arthur Miller writes into his play a progression away from the helpless irresponsibility of Willy, toward the values Willy died trying to discover. It has cost Biff the life of his father, but now, unlike Happy, he understands; and because of his anagnorisis both his and his father's suffering have made a difference. Only through that suffering could Biff have arrived at this recognition. He leaves his father's grave to go toward a new life. He has found the answers to his father's questions and to his own. He knows who he is, and in our modern world of curvalinear time, that is perhaps the greatest heroic feat.

The difference between Aristotelian and modern dramatic tragedy testifies not to a paucity of contemporary tragic vision, but to the difference between Aristotle's world and our own.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following is by no means a complete list of sources referred to for the writing of this paper. It is a list of those works quoted specifically in the paper, and meant as a short guide to help other students of this subject get started on a bibliography.


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