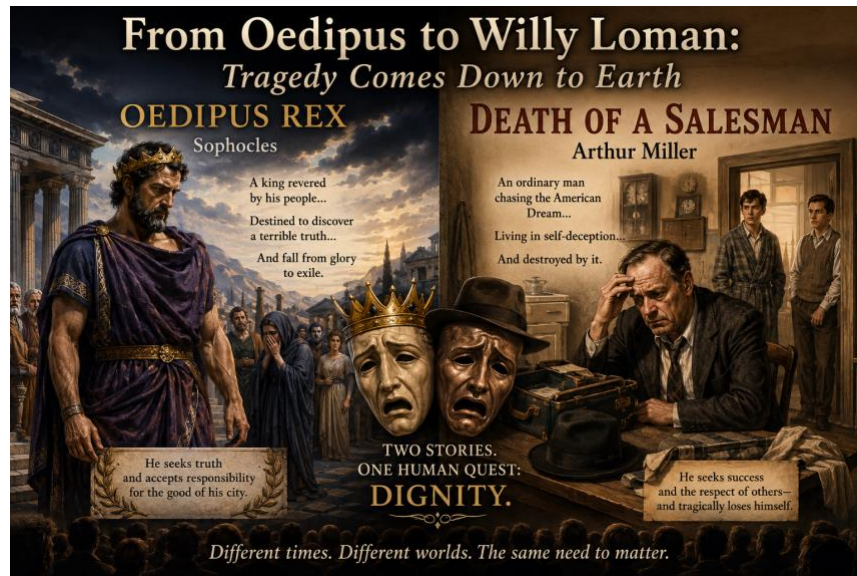




From Oedipus to Willy Loman: Tragedy Comes Down to Earth

Two Very Different Tragic Heroes

Put Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* beside Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and you can see just how much the idea of tragedy changed over the centuries. The difference is almost summed up by the names of the two central characters: **Oedipus the King** and **Willy Loman**. One is a king, hero, and ruler of his people. The other is a worn-out traveling salesman whose very name suggests "low man." Yet both are tragic figures.

Aristotle, writing about a century after Sophocles, described tragedy in his *Poetics* largely in terms of great figures brought down by human frailty and circumstance. More than two thousand years later, Arthur Miller argued in "Tragedy and the Common Man" that ordinary people could be just as suitable for tragedy as kings. *Death of a Salesman* puts that argument onstage.

A King With a Long Way to Fall

At the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus occupies the traditional position of a tragic hero. He is king of Thebes, respected by his people and celebrated as the man who saved the city by solving the riddle of the Sphinx.

Oedipus then discovers that, without knowing it, he has killed his father and married his mother. The very actions he and others took to prevent that fate actually helped bring it about. His fall could hardly be greater: from admired king to disgraced exile.

Willy Loman Doesn't Have Far to Fall

Willy begins *Death of a Salesman* in a very different place. He isn't powerful, famous, or particularly successful. He is an aging salesman whose career is already slipping away. His employer no longer values him, he isn't making enough money, and he borrows from his friend Charley while pretending to his family that the money comes from sales commissions.

Willy has no kingdom to lose. What he does have is an image of himself—and that image is collapsing. That is Miller's great departure from classical tragedy. A man doesn't need a throne to suffer a tragic fall. Losing one's dignity, purpose, family relationships, and belief in oneself can be every bit as devastating.

Different Flaws, Similar Destruction

Both men possess the fatal flaw we associate with tragedy, but their flaws are very different. Oedipus is proud, quick-tempered, and relentlessly determined to discover the truth. His tragedy is particularly painful because he does not knowingly commit the terrible acts for which he eventually punishes himself.

Willy's tragedy grows largely from self-deception. He exaggerates his abilities, cheats on his wife, refuses to recognize his failures, and clings to the belief that being well liked is the secret to success. Even when reality contradicts him, Willy retreats into the version of his life he wants to believe.

The contrast is striking: **Oedipus is destroyed when he discovers the truth; Willy is destroyed because he cannot fully accept it.**

Two Kinds of Sacrifice

Both plays end with sacrifice, but here again the contrast is sharp. Oedipus accepts disgrace and punishment partly to free Thebes from the consequences of the former king's murder. His fall is terrible, but there is nobility in his willingness to accept responsibility.

Willy also believes he is sacrificing himself for others. He commits suicide believing the insurance money will finally give his son Biff the opportunity for success that Willy could never provide. But his final act rests upon one last tragic misunderstanding. His funeral drives the point home: Willy had spent his life believing that popularity and personal connections were the keys to success, yet almost nobody comes.

From the Palace to the Living Room

Oedipus and Willy Loman stand at opposite ends of the history of tragedy, but they share something important: both desperately seek dignity. Oedipus seeks it through truth, responsibility, and atonement. Willy seeks it through success, recognition, and the respect of his family.

The Greeks gave us kings who fell from palaces. Arthur Miller showed us that tragedy could happen to the fellow next door. All he needed was a mortgage, a family, a job—and a dream that wa