

Department of English

Fourth Year

Modern Drama

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First Lecture

An Introduction

The main element of a tragedy is the tragic hero. He is the person who takes all the sufferings of the world. The German Philosopher, cultural critic poet, composer and scholar Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) mentioned in his book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, chapter XX-XXI that, the two key aspects of tragedy are music and the tragic hero. The hero takes the suffering of the world on his shoulders and relieves us from the burden. He serves as an example to the audience. He prepares himself for higher existence through his destruction but not through his victories. The power of music associated with Dionysian beings is part of Dionysian essence and is too much for anyone to take. Music consults to myth with a metaphysical significance which can never be achieved with words only. If we feel like part of pure Dionysian beings we will collapse from the depth of unresolved world's will. As a result, we demand myth, which uses the hero as negotiator to shield us from the power of music. The hero assists us from the suffering of the world being an Apollonian illusion. He delivers sufferings that are primordial. The Apollonian influence upholds man from his uncontrolled self-destruction and deceives him by making aware of the universality of the Dionysian process in a belief that the picture he is watching is a detached picture of the world.

Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher and scientist, in his book *Poetics*, Chapter XIII, defined the element of the ideal tragic situation and the tragic hero. He states, "This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to

any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind. He is one of those people who are held in great esteem and enjoy great good fortune, like Oedipus, Thyestes, and distinguished men from that kind of family” (21).

By mentioning “error” Aristotle meant “hamartia,” the flaw in character that results from ignorance or an error of judgment that leads the hero to his downfall. This hamartia or error of judgment is considered as a genuine tragic situation by the Greeks. It is an impulsive act which does not include malice elements. It is mentioned in Adade-Yeaboah Asuamah’s paper, “The Metamorphosis of Tragic Hero” that, “there is a line of demarcation between hamartia and tragic flaw, the latter being a trait inherent in the tragic hero”. Hamartia is considered an important element of tragedy which was used by the classical tragedians and also followed by the tragedians and playwrights over time keeping the Greek model as an ideal but with a slight change in it.

During the Renaissance time period, the meaning of hamartia which is associated with the tragic hero has gone under a drastic change. This is mainly because of the interpretation of the Italian scholars. As Renaissance period represents rejection of the classical period, the critics were first to translate *Poetics*. They have translated the hamartia as “a weakness of characters” instead of fatal flaw or going wrong. (Asuamah 8). They insisted to include tragic hamartia as the part of characters. Therefore, it became popular and acceptable by the people of that time, considering it the characterization of the post-classical tragic hero.

The main difference of the classical and post classical schools of thought is the influence of religion especially Christianity. “The Greeks were pagans who believed in instant retributive measures. The renaissance men are influenced by the tenets of the Christian religion” (Asuamah 8). As a result, they believed in sin and

intuitive corruption. Moreover, the inclusion of fate was necessary in Classical dramas whereas, Christianity replaces the belief on fate with nemesis or providence. For example, there is a belief in Christianity that god has sent different intercession to prevent men from evil. The idea of punishment is for those who do not show guilt or repentance for their crime. This way the literary tradition changed from the classical time and transformed into Christian religious belief. The story remains the same. It talks about a downfall of a prince or of a man fell from a high position but he is responsible for his action. He is no longer the pawn in the hands of gods and goddesses. He makes his own choice from his knowledge.

In the modern time during the 20th century tragedy came out with a new form keeping the classical concept in mind but the writers of modern era portrayed tragic hero as a man who is not a prince or a high born. He does not fall from his position. He does not need catharsis to bring the story to a close. He is an ordinary man living in present society dealing with the problems generally people face in their daily lives. For example; Willy Loman, who is a salesman who has hopes and dreams of a better life. On the other hand, Ephraim Cabot is a farmer and his tragedy is limited to his life and surroundings.

The modern day tragic hero may have aspirations and ambitions but he does not need to die with an epiphany or sufferings. His story can close without his death and without his realization. For him the belief in religion and fate is not as important as they were in classical times. The modern day tragedy focuses more on man and the inner conflict of the human mind rather than focusing on god or any other super natural being.

Second Lecture

Plot summary

As a flute melody plays, Willy Loman returns to his home in Brooklyn one night, exhausted from a failed sales trip. His wife, Linda, tries to persuade him to ask his boss, Howard Wagner, to let him work in New York so that he won't have to travel. Willy says that he will talk to Howard the next day. Willy complains that Biff, his older son who has come back home to visit, has yet to make something of himself. Linda scolds Willy for being so critical, and Willy goes to the kitchen for a snack.

As Willy talks to himself in the kitchen, Biff and his younger brother, Happy, who is also visiting, reminisce about their adolescence and discuss their father's babbling, which often includes criticism of Biff's failure to live up to Willy's expectations. As Biff and Happy, dissatisfied with their lives, fantasize about buying a ranch out West, Willy becomes immersed in a daydream. He praises his sons, now younger, who are washing his car. The young Biff, a high school football star, and the young Happy appear. They interact affectionately with their father, who has just returned from a business trip. Willy confides in Biff and Happy that he is going to open his own business one day, bigger than that owned by his neighbor, Charley. Charley's son, Bernard, enters looking for Biff, who must study for math class in order to avoid failing. Willy points out to his sons that although Bernard is smart, he is not "well liked," which will hurt him in the long run.

A younger Linda enters, and the boys leave to do some chores. Willy boasts of a phenomenally successful sales trip, but Linda coaxes him into revealing that his trip was actually only meagerly successful. Willy complains that he soon won't be able to make all of the payments on their appliances and car. He complains that people don't like him and that he's not good at his job. As Linda consoles him, he hears the laughter of his mistress. He approaches The Woman, who is still laughing, and engages in another reminiscent daydream. Willy and The Woman flirt, and she thanks him for giving her stockings.

The Woman disappears, and Willy fades back into his prior daydream, in the kitchen. Linda, now mending stockings, reassures him. He scolds her mending and orders her to throw the stockings out. Bernard bursts in, again looking for Biff. Linda reminds Willy that Biff has to return a football that he stole, and she adds that Biff is too rough with the neighborhood girls. Willy hears The Woman laugh and explodes at Bernard and Linda. Both leave, and though the daydream ends, Willy continues to mutter to himself. The older Happy comes downstairs and tries to quiet Willy. Agitated, Willy shouts his regret about not going to Alaska with his brother, Ben, who eventually found a diamond mine in Africa and became rich. Charley, having heard the commotion, enters. Happy goes off to bed, and Willy and Charley begin to play cards. Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy, insulted, refuses it. As they argue, Willy imagines that Ben enters. Willy accidentally calls Charley Ben. Ben inspects Willy's house and tells him that he has to catch a train soon to look at properties in Alaska. As Willy talks to Ben about the prospect of going to Alaska, Charley, seeing no one there, gets confused and questions Willy. Willy yells at Charley, who leaves. The younger Linda enters and Ben meets her. Willy asks Ben impatiently about his life. Ben recounts his travels and talks about their father. As Ben is about to leave, Willy daydreams further, and Charley and Bernard rush in to tell him that Biff and Happy are stealing lumber. Although Ben eventually leaves, Willy continues to talk to him.

Back in the present, the older Linda enters to find Willy outside. Biff and Happy come downstairs and discuss Willy's condition with their mother. Linda scolds Biff for judging Willy harshly. Biff tells her that he knows Willy is a fake, but he refuses to elaborate. Linda mentions that Willy has tried to commit suicide. Happy grows angry and rebukes Biff for his failure in the business world. Willy enters and yells at Biff. Happy intervenes and eventually proposes that he and Biff go into the sporting goods business together. Willy immediately brightens and gives Biff a host of tips about asking for a loan from one of Biff's old employers, Bill Oliver. After more arguing and reconciliation, everyone finally goes to bed.

Act II opens with Willy enjoying the breakfast that Linda has made for him. Willy ponders the bright-seeming future before getting angry again about his expensive appliances. Linda informs Willy that Biff and Happy are taking him out to dinner

that night. Excited, Willy announces that he is going to make Howard Wagner give him a New York job. The phone rings, and Linda chats with Biff, reminding him to be nice to his father at the restaurant that night.

As the lights fade on Linda, they come up on Howard playing with a wire recorder in his office. Willy tries to broach the subject of working in New York, but Howard interrupts him and makes him listen to his kids and wife on the wire recorder. When Willy finally gets a word in, Howard rejects his plea. Willy launches into a lengthy recalling of how a legendary salesman named Dave Singleman inspired him to go into sales. Howard leaves and Willy gets angry. Howard soon re-enters and tells Willy to take some time off. Howard leaves and Ben enters, inviting Willy to join him in Alaska. The younger Linda enters and reminds Willy of his sons and job. The young Biff enters, and Willy praises Biff's prospects and the fact that he is well liked.

Ben leaves and Bernard rushes in, eagerly awaiting Biff's big football game. Willy speaks optimistically to Biff about the game. Charley enters and teases Willy about the game. As Willy chases Charley off, the lights rise on a different part of the stage. Willy continues yelling from offstage, and Jenny, Charley's secretary, asks a grown-up Bernard to quiet him down. Willy enters and prattles on about a "very big deal" that Biff is working on. Daunted by Bernard's success (he mentions to Willy that he is going to Washington to fight a case), Willy asks Bernard why Biff turned out to be such a failure. Bernard asks Willy what happened in Boston that made Biff decide not to go to summer school. Willy defensively tells Bernard not to blame him.

Charley enters and sees Bernard off. When Willy asks for more money than Charley usually loans him, Charley again offers Willy a job. Willy again refuses and eventually tells Charley that he was fired. Charley scolds Willy for always needing to be liked and angrily gives him the money. Calling Charley his only friend, Willy exits on the verge of tears.

At Frank's Chop House, Happy helps Stanley, a waiter, prepare a table. They ogle and chat up a girl, Miss Forsythe, who enters the restaurant. Biff enters, and Happy introduces him to Miss Forsythe, continuing to flirt with her. Miss Forsythe,

a call girl, leaves to telephone another call girl (at Happy's request), and Biff spills out that he waited six hours for Bill Oliver and Oliver didn't even recognize him. Upset at his father's unrelenting misconception that he, Biff, was a salesman for Oliver, Biff plans to relieve Willy of his illusions. Willy enters, and Biff tries gently, at first, to tell him what happened at Oliver's office. Willy blurts out that he was fired. Stunned, Biff again tries to let Willy down easily. Happy cuts in with remarks suggesting Biff's success, and Willy eagerly awaits the good news.

Biff finally explodes at Willy for being unwilling to listen. The young Bernard runs in shouting for Linda, and Biff, Happy, and Willy start to argue. As Biff explains what happened, their conversation recedes into the background. The young Bernard tells Linda that Biff failed math. The restaurant conversation comes back into focus and Willy criticizes Biff for failing math. Willy then hears the voice of the hotel operator in Boston and shouts that he is not in his room. Biff scrambles to quiet Willy and claims that Oliver is talking to his partner about giving Biff the money. Willy's renewed interest and probing questions irk Biff more, and he screams at Willy. Willy hears The Woman laugh and he shouts back at Biff, hitting him and staggering. Miss Forsythe enters with another call girl, Letta. Biff helps Willy to the washroom and, finding Happy flirting with the girls, argues with him about Willy. Biff storms out, and Happy follows with the girls.

Willy and The Woman enter, dressing themselves and flirting. The door knocks and Willy hurries The Woman into the bathroom. Willy answers the door; the young Biff enters and tells Willy that he failed math. Willy tries to usher him out of the room, but Biff imitates his math teacher's lisp, which elicits laughter from Willy and The Woman. Willy tries to cover up his indiscretion, but Biff refuses to believe his stories and storms out, dejected, calling Willy a "phony little fake." Back in the restaurant, Stanley helps Willy up. Willy asks him where he can find a seed store. Stanley gives him directions to one, and Willy hurries off.

The light comes up on the Loman kitchen, where Happy enters looking for Willy. He moves into the living room and sees Linda. Biff comes inside and Linda scolds the boys and slaps away the flowers in Happy's hand. She yells at them for abandoning Willy. Happy attempts to appease her, but Biff goes in search of Willy. He finds Willy planting seeds in the garden with a flashlight. Willy is

consulting Ben about a \$20,000 proposition. Biff approaches him to say goodbye and tries to bring him inside. Willy moves into the house, followed by Biff, and becomes angry again about Biff's failure. Happy tries to calm Biff, but Biff and Willy erupt in fury at each other. Biff starts to sob, which touches Willy. Everyone goes to bed except Willy, who renews his conversation with Ben, elated at how great Biff will be with \$20,000 of insurance money. Linda soon calls out for Willy but gets no response. Biff and Happy listen as well. They hear Willy's car speed away.

In the requiem, Linda and Happy stand in shock after Willy's poorly attended funeral. Biff states that Willy had the wrong dreams. Charley defends Willy as a victim of his profession. Ready to leave, Biff invites Happy to go back out West with him. Happy declares that he will stick it out in New York to validate Willy's death. Linda asks Willy for forgiveness for being unable to cry. She begins to sob, repeating "We're free. . . ." All exit, and the flute melody is heard as the curtain falls.

Third Lecture

Discussion

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The American Dream

Willy believes wholeheartedly in what he considers the promise of the American Dream—that a “well liked” and “personally attractive” man in business will indubitably and deservedly acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life. Oddly, his fixation with the superficial qualities of attractiveness and likeability is at odds with a more gritty, more rewarding understanding of the American Dream that identifies hard work without complaint as the key to success. Willy’s interpretation of likeability is superficial—he childishly dislikes Bernard because he considers Bernard a nerd. Willy’s blind faith in his stunted version of the American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline when he is unable to accept the disparity between the Dream and his own life.

Abandonment

Willy’s life charts a course from one abandonment to the next, leaving him in greater despair each time. Willy’s father leaves him and Ben when Willy is very young, leaving Willy neither a tangible (money) nor an intangible (history) legacy. Ben eventually departs for Alaska, leaving Willy to lose himself in a warped vision of the American Dream. Likely a result of these early experiences, Willy develops a fear of abandonment, which makes him want his family to conform to the American Dream. His efforts to raise perfect sons, however, reflect his inability to understand reality. The young Biff, whom Willy considers the embodiment of promise, drops Willy and Willy’s zealous ambitions for him when he finds out about Willy’s adultery. Biff’s ongoing inability to succeed in business furthers his estrangement from Willy. When, at Frank’s Chop House, Willy finally believes that Biff is on the cusp of greatness, Biff shatters Willy’s illusions and, along with Happy, abandons the deluded, babbling Willy in the washroom.

Betrayal

Willy's primary obsession throughout the play is what he considers to be Biff's betrayal of his ambitions for him. Willy believes that he has every right to expect Biff to fulfill the promise inherent in him. When Biff walks out on Willy's ambitions for him, Willy takes this rejection as a personal affront (he associates it with "insult" and "spite"). Willy, after all, is a salesman, and Biff's ego-crushing rebuff ultimately reflects Willy's inability to sell him on the American Dream—the product in which Willy himself believes most faithfully. Willy assumes that Biff's betrayal stems from Biff's discovery of Willy's affair with The Woman—a betrayal of Linda's love. Whereas Willy feels that Biff has betrayed him, Biff feels that Willy, a "phony little fake," has betrayed *him* with his unending stream of ego-stroking lies.

Fourth lecture

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Mythic Figures

Willy's tendency to mythologize people contributes to his deluded understanding of the world. He speaks of Dave Singleman as a legend and imagines that his death must have been beautifully noble. Willy compares Biff and Happy to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules because he believes that his sons are pinnacles of "personal attractiveness" and power through "well liked"-ness; to him, they seem the very incarnation of the American Dream.

Willy's mythologizing proves quite nearsighted, however. Willy fails to realize the hopelessness of Singleman's lonely, on-the-job, on-the-road death. Trying to achieve what he considers to be Singleman's heroic status, Willy commits himself to a pathetic death and meaningless legacy (even if Willy's life insurance policy ends up paying off, Biff wants nothing to do with Willy's ambition for him). Similarly, neither Biff nor Happy ends up leading an ideal, godlike life; while Happy does believe in the American Dream, it seems likely that he will end up no better off than the decidedly ungodlike Willy.

The American West, Alaska, and the African Jungle

These regions represent the potential of instinct to Biff and Willy. Willy's father found success in Alaska and his brother, Ben, became rich in Africa; these exotic locales, especially when compared to Willy's banal Brooklyn neighborhood, crystallize how Willy's obsession with the commercial world of the city has trapped him in an unpleasant reality. Whereas Alaska and the African jungle symbolize Willy's failure, the American West, on the other hand, symbolizes Biff's potential. Biff realizes that he has been content only when working on farms, out in the open. His westward escape from both Willy's

delusions and the commercial world of the eastern United States suggests a nineteenth-century pioneer mentality—Biff, unlike Willy, recognizes the importance of the individual

Fifth Lecture

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Seeds

Seeds represent for Willy the opportunity to prove the worth of his labor, both as a salesman and a father. His desperate, nocturnal attempt to grow vegetables signifies his shame about barely being able to put food on the table and having nothing to leave his children when he passes. Willy feels that he has worked hard but fears that he will not be able to help his offspring any more than his own abandoning father helped him. The seeds also symbolize Willy's sense of failure with Biff. Despite the American Dream's formula for success, which Willy considers infallible, Willy's efforts to cultivate and nurture Biff went awry. Realizing that his all-American football star has turned into a lazy bum, Willy takes Biff's failure and lack of ambition as a reflection of his abilities as a father.

Diamonds

To Willy, diamonds represent tangible wealth and, hence, both validation of one's labor (and life) and the ability to pass material goods on to one's offspring, two things that Willy desperately craves. Correlatively, diamonds, the discovery of which made Ben a fortune, symbolize Willy's failure as a salesman. Despite Willy's belief in the American Dream, a belief unwavering to the extent that he passed up the opportunity to go with Ben to Alaska, the Dream's promise of financial security has eluded Willy. At the end of the play, Ben encourages Willy to enter the "jungle" finally and retrieve this elusive diamond—that is, to kill himself for insurance money in order to make his life meaningful.

Linda's and The Woman's Stockings

Willy's strange obsession with the condition of Linda's stockings foreshadows his later flashback to Biff's discovery of him and The Woman in their Boston hotel room. The teenage Biff accuses Willy of giving away Linda's stockings to The

Woman. Stockings assume a metaphorical weight as the symbol of betrayal and sexual infidelity. New stockings are important for both Willy's pride in being financially successful and thus able to provide for his family and for Willy's ability to ease his guilt about, and suppress the memory of, his betrayal of Linda and Biff.

The Rubber Hose

The rubber hose is a stage prop that reminds the audience of Willy's desperate attempts at suicide. He has apparently attempted to kill himself by inhaling gas, which is, ironically, the very substance essential to one of the most basic elements with which he must equip his home for his family's health and comfort—heat. Literal death by inhaling gas parallels the metaphorical death that Willy feels in his struggle to afford such a basic necessity.

Sixth Lecture

The American Dream in Death of a Salesman: A Marxist Reading

The major theme in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" is without a doubt about the "American Dream". Throughout the story is a non-stop struggle for financial stability and being able to fit into the right place in society. "Death of a Salesman" is the perfect example of the Marxist perspective because the only happiness found is measured by the success obtained in the working world. It is by comparing the life experiences of the book's two main characters Biff and Willy that the reader can make this conclusion. The Marxist perspective is also applied to Biff's character quite heavily, especially because of the given time period. Biff is more of a 'hands on' man that would much rather working outside, or on a farm for a living. This goes completely against the social norm because he does not want to work for someone else. Biff's father Willy can't understand why Biff would rather work outside than to have a normal, respectable job, being a salesman like his father. Even more important than the type of job is how much money is made, according to Willy. Both Biff and Willy starts the play in a state of false consciousness, leading them both to being alienated and commodified. Unlike Biff however, Willy does not come out of this state and will bring his beliefs to his grave. Only after realizing just how fake his whole life was, was Biff finally able to be freed from this prison created by a capitalist society.

Willy Loman's state of false consciousness is that he believes in a version of the American dream that is no longer applicable to modern day America. Like many out there, Willy Loman covets the possibilities of success that define the American Dream, with the firm belief that such success could be only achieved through charm, style and popularity. In fact, he says that "[...] the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, in the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want," (25). Time, however, proves Willy wrong when Bernard manages to land himself a successful career because of his good grades while charm and popularity gets Willy's sons nowhere. Indirectly because of his fixation on popularity, he is alienated from Biff. Although Biff had been extremely close to him when he was young, his relationship with his son disintegrated after the latter found out about his affair. His obsession with popularity convinced him to ask Biff to prolong their conversation when it was important for the teen to get a good grade in school so he wouldn't flunk out. Willy also says in the book: "How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In

the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years ago now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week!" (1215). This shows how important it is to Willy that a good amount of money is made, and that is how you can judge whether a man is successful or not. The American dream is also present through Willy's ideas on how to achieve success in the workplace. Willy is convinced that if he is attractive and well-liked that success and money will rain down upon him. The irony in this is that Willy is old, not very attractive, and doesn't really have any friends. This is also a culprit of Willy's mental deterioration as well as physical. All because he is not popular and wealthy, Willy becomes crazy. His suicide was all so his family could have money; because that is the only way he thinks they will be happy. Willy neglects the fact that he is leaving his loved ones, all because he wants them to be able to live the American dream that he never could.