Death Of A Salesman Vs Hamlet Essay, Research Paper

Death Of A Salesman Vs. Hamlet

Willy Loman and Hamlet, two characters so alike, though different. Both are

perfect examples of tragedy in literature, though for separate reasons and by distinct

methods. The definition of a tragedy, in a nutshell, states that for a character to be

considered tragic, he/she must be of high moral estate, fall to a level of catastrophe,

induce sympathy and horror in the audience, and usually die, and in doing so, re-establish

order in the society. Hamlet follows this to a “T”. Death of a Salesman does not fall

within these set guidelines but is still considered tragic for reasons, though different,

somewhat parallel those of Hamlet’s.

Hamlet, a rich young price of high moral estate suddenly has his joyous life

ripped away from him when his father, Hamlet Sr., suddenly passes away. Though

originally thought to be of natural causes, it is later revealed to him through his father’s

ghost, that dear old dad was murdered by his Step-Father, and also his Uncle, Claudius.

Vowing revenge upon his Uncle/Dad, Hamlet begins to mentally falter and eventually, is

in such a wild rage that he accidentally kills Polonious believing him to be his father.

Hilarity ensues.

Ophelia, Hamlet’s love interest, commits suicide/dies (that’s up for debate

elsewhere) after going slightly mad from the impact of her father’s death, then Laertes,

Polonius’ son, arrives on the scene enraged and ready to kill Hamlet for what he’s done,

and just when you thought things couldn’t get any worse, unbeknownst to Hamlet,

Claudius has been plotting to kill him. Talk about your bad days.

A duel takes place between Hamlet and Laertes where Laertes, using a poison-

tipped sword, cuts Hamlet, thus giving way for his impending death. Hamlet eventually

gets hold of the sword and kills Laertes, then kills King Claudius. Just as the play ends,

Hamlet takes his last breath of air, appoints Fortinbras Jr. as the new King of Denmark,

and dies.

In Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman, a salesman who believed himself to be a

powerful man, has his life unravel before him as he loses his job, his sanity and the

respect of those around him. Many years before, Willy had an affair. This “dirtied” his

appearance to his son Biff, though his wife never found out. Biff later went on to

become a drifter of sorts, dabbling in one low-paying profession after another until

finally settling on a farm.

After Willy was fired, for being too old, too inept or both, supposedly, Willy

pretends he’s still working and doesn’t let his wife in on the bad news. Too stubborn to

accept a job from his next-door neighbour, Willy is forced to lie to his family.

Through visions of his older brother Ben, coupled with the degradation of his

mind, Willy eventually commits suicide to ensure his son Biff’s career through the Life

Insurance policy. Willy dies an empty, shallow death.

Hamlet and Willy are both considered tragic. The Classical Tragedy’s definition

was tweaked with to make it a more general encompassor. A common man’s injured

sense of dignity, coupled with forces beyond his control and/or ability to comprehend,

displace him from his perceived place, causing the audience to recognize such and

prepare itself for the inevitable finale in which the hopelessness and defeat are more

poignant than the actual death.

Willy and Hamlet both fell from grace, both commited morally bankrupt acts and

evetually died, giving way to a re-establishment of order. Tragic men, for different

reasons, bound together through their demeanor and their deaths.