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The Tragedy of Linda Lowman

At the University of Oregon, professor Tekla Bude defines modern tragedy in a video titled “*What is tragedy?*” as “if a narrative begins with everything in order and ends in disorder, it can probably be classified as a tragedy.” Although this definition may seem broad, she also states that it “focuses on the middle class” meaning that if a tragedy contains elements of societal or economic factors such as having a character forcefully lose their chance at fulfilling the American Dream, then it can be considered a tragedy. For the sake of this argument, Tekla’s definition will be taken into account, but I would argue that there is a subtle flaw in her definition because it doesn’t necessarily regard heroic determination or action of a character, it can be argued that tragedy also contains an important principle: Heroism. Although it is said that tragedy may no longer regard the falling of a hero, the concept can still be used as a measurement of determining a person’s right to being owed justice that was never given to them. When considering these principles, I argue that in “*Death of a Salesman*,” Linda Lowman’s heroic determination, actions, and loyalty to her husband are what make her the most tragic character out of the three plays. In contrast to *Death of a Salesman*, there are two other plays that contain definitive tragic characters, but they’re lack of heroic actions do not make their tragedy as equal as Linda Lowman’s.

To begin discussing Linda Lowman’s character, it’s important to understand her heroic properties. Throughout the film, Linda is known for defending her husband (Willy Lowman) no

matter the moral reasoning. The loyalty she holds for her husband is also one of disillusion.

Giving an example, there is a moment in the story where Linda finds out that Willy is plotting on killing himself, when she mentions it to her children she continues to defend Willy but wants to save his life by fixing the relationship Biff has with Willy. “I’m — I’m ashamed to. How can I mention it to him? Every day I go down and take away that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? I don’t know what to do. I live from day to day, boys. I tell you, I know every thought in his mind. It sounds so old-fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you’ve turned your backs on him. (She is bent over in the chair, weeping, her face in her hands.) Biff, I swear to God! Biff, his life is in your hands!” (p. 84). The reason this presents a sense of disillusion is that she thinks she knows “every thought in his mind” as well as believing that if Biff fixes his relationship with his father, then Willy will not kill himself. Her disillusion provides a tragic element because it forces her to work towards something that would eventually land her into disappointment and exhaustion. This heroic action of stepping in and putting effort towards a man whose choice is to leave his family, regardless of their financial dependencies and grieving consequences is a major leading factor that makes Linda Lowman a tragic character. Regardless, her goal as both a mother and a wife is to keep the household calm and in order, all she has ever wanted was a family without conflict. What makes this heroic, is the fact that she does it entirely unconditionally. No other character in any of the three plays has characters that represent a passion for seeing the good in people as much as this character. Some may argue that Mary Tyrone's character in “*A Long Day’s Journey into Night*” contains similar principles due to her child’s tuberculosis sickness, but it doesn’t compare to Linda Lowman’s defending nature. Although Mary wishes to save her child, it can be said that it is any mother’s duty to do so. This

is where things get a little complicated in terms of who's more heroic. Although Mary's situation is heavy, it still does not compare to Linda Lowman's consistent heroic actions that lead her to suffer. Mary does not go out of her way as much as Linda. For example, in the play there is a specific moment when Mary expresses her opinion about doctors out of frustration: "I hate doctors! They'll do anything- anything to keep you coming to them. They'll sell their souls! What's worse, they'll sell yours, and you never know it till one day you find yourself in hell!" (p. 65). In this example, although Mary seems passionate as a mother, and angry towards the healthcare system, it doesn't necessarily solve anything. In comparison to Linda, she actually attempts to solve issues regardless of the problem. What makes Linda more tragic in this case, is that nobody goes out of their way to listen to her, forcing her in a powerless situation. Mary on the other hand, her expression seems to shake the room, forcing everyone's attention. If Linda had this attention, she wouldn't be as tragic of a character.

In terms of the tragic nature of Linda Lowman's character, one would have to see it from a societal point of view: Her submission to society's suggestive gender roles had put her in a position of disempowerment. This disempowerment has affected her both financially and socially which has forcefully established a disvalue to her pure actions. These pure actions regard her attempt to fix her son and husband's relationship to fulfill the dream of obtaining a functional household. She is trapped within her own heroic actions, resulting in the unfortunate downfall of losing her husband. That of which, she later becomes the victim of her husband's selfish commitment to suicide; Causing potential financial struggles in the future. As well as grief, regret, and permanent loneliness. Finally, she was also blissfully cheated on, which brings no justice to her or her heroic actions, which concludes with a formula of absolute tragedy. No other character out of the three plays come close to the way she was treated. Giving an example

from the story itself, here is a referenced situation: In *“Death of a Salesman”* there is a moment when Willy is talking amongst his sons about going into the business world. As the conversation is spreading hope amongst the family for a brighter future, Linda happily chimes into the conversation as they’re talking. Willy’s passive aggression quickly becomes an outburst of abuse, forcing her to keep quiet as the men of the household talk amongst themselves.

Regardless of this abusive action, Linda continues to defend Willy and continues to show her loyalty to her husband unconditionally. This example proves to us that she is by far one of the most tragic characters of the three plays because no other character put themselves in a position of victimize abuse, only to be accepting of it for the better good of fixing the relationships within the household.

In terms of victimized abuse, there is one other character that has been put through a lot of abuse, but she has never put herself in a position of defending it in comparison to Linda. When regarding the story of *“A Streetcar Named Desire,”* Both Branch and Stella have been through a series of unjust events such as rape, being cheated on, and have been physically attacked, and although it is tragic, there doesn’t seem to be any heroism within those stories by either of the characters, but only straightforward suffrage and personal agenda. Neither of them had put forth their efforts to save anyone unconditionally, and neither of them seemed to have wanted to do good, which makes Linda more tragic than the two characters if we are to consider heroism. If anything, Blanche is a rather narcissistic character who’s main goal is only to find a dreamlike relationship with another man, throughout the film, she never seems to go out of her way to save or help any individual. Her goal was to run away from a bad situation that she had put herself in. Blanche further justifies her act of running away by trying to manipulate Mitch into believing that what she did was justified by saying “I had many intimacies with strangers.

After the death of Allen, intimacies with strangers was all I seemed to be able to fill my empty heart with. I think it was panic. Just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection here and there in the most unlikely places. Even at last in a 17-year-old boy” (2:08:45). This example says so much about Blanche’s intentions, and that she isn’t a good person deep down, all she wants is a magical relationship which makes her far from a hero, and far from being as tragic as Linda Lowman.

To conclude, it is important to note the impact of the ending in “*Death of a Salesman*.” At the very end of the story, Willy dies tragically through the act of suicide. This action is a very sensitive topic, but I do feel as though it must be addressed appropriately: Though his actions were sad, it isn’t necessarily a fate he was required to fulfill, it was an act that put his entire family through horrible trauma. Trauma that cannot be taken back, and financial dependencies that can never be upheld by anyone else. His action was simply selfish when looking at his position as a family man. Due to these actions, Linda is forced to live the rest of her life in a consistent struggle. Whether it’s financial, grief, or loneliness, his death will always affect her horribly. That said, I do not think Willy is more tragic than Linda, and that the audience should take a step back and give it another perspective. Regardless of this, she had always been there to keep the peace, to keep his dream alive, and to keep the family strong. Her failure of this unconditional path was the downfall that led to her being the most tragic character out of the three plays.