Death of a Salesman: The Common Man as Tragic Hero

Directions: Read Miller’s viewpoint and answer the following questions.

Since America has no kings or princes, it seems unlikely that a classical tragedy (as defined by Aristotle) could be written here. But Arthur Miller, in his 1949 essay entitled “Tragedy and the Common Man,” defends the possibility of an ordinary American having the qualities of a tragic hero. Miller believes that a common man “is as apt a subject for tragedy in the highest sense as kings were”; that a common man can think, aspire, suffer; and that a common man can give his life for “his sense of dignity.”

1. Do you agree with Miller? Why or why not?

2. Do audiences of Death of a Salesman experience catharsis? Explain.

3. Many critics accuse the play of merely arousing pathos—the audience feels sorry for Willy, but does not feel that he died nobly or that he suffered for a high cause. How might Miller respond to this argument?

4. Does Willy Loman experience recognition? (Try to argue both sides.)
5. Notice Willy’s mood at the end of the play? How can we reconcile his mood with the idea of tragedy?

6. Why do you think Miller entitled his play *Death of a Salesman* and not *Life of a Salesman* or *Life of the Salesman*?

7. In the other two tragedies we read Fate influenced the lives of the tragic heroes. In *Death of a Salesman*, what force takes the place of Fate? Explain.

8. Do you consider *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy and Willy Loman a tragic hero? Explain. Use your notes from *Oedipus* and Aristotle to help you out.