

## ILLUSION VERSUS REALITY IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF ARTHUR MILLER

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**Abstract**— Until the post-World War I era, American drama, confronted with religious hostility and then by economic necessity and academic indifference, struggled to come into its own as a respected literary genre at home and as a force that made itself felt on foreign stages. A commonplace of American literary history is that the plays of Eugene O'Neill, in Walter J. Meserve's words, marked "America's full-scale arrival into the modern drama of western civilization."

A serious dramatist who believed in drama's ability to bring about change, Miller explored both the social and psychological dimensions of his characters. For him, individual dilemmas always grew out of the crucial social contexts that confront average people. He is much concerned with how individual morality is influenced by the social pressure that press unrelentingly upon them. His dramas

attempt to go beyond being merely simple pieces or self absorbed Psychological studies to deal in depth with moral and ethical issues. He was interested in how ordinary individuals can live in unity and harmony with their fellow humans without sacrificing their own dignity. In most of Miller's dramas, the family is the central unit through which he presented and explored social and ethical issues. Central to Miller's family drama is the image of the failed father. In selling out his fellow men to protect his family business, Joe Keller in *All My Sons* indirectly causes the death of his own son, Larry. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman forces his false dream on his son, with disastrous consequences. Both fathers commit suicide. Quentin's father in *After the Fall*, like Victor Franz's father in *The Price* and Moe Baum in *The American Clock*, lose money in the Depression and go into devastating psychological declines. The sons in Miller's writing often strive to

break their bonds with their fathers. Chris Keller, like Biff Loman, becomes disillusioned with his father's false values. Quentin sees through his father's phoniness, and Victor realizes his father's betrayal. The father often represents the misguided and self-centered dream of material success that must be attained at any cost. The sons must break away from their fathers and their fathers' worlds if they are to realize their own identities and lead more authentic lives. In the family dramas, the mother has two sides. Kate Keller, like Linda Loman, both supports and defends her husband at all costs. In Miller's later plays, the mothers refuse to accept the failure of their husbands. Quentin's mother treats the father with contempt, and Victor's mother vomits on his bankrupt father. Although the mother may be a source of stability in support of the father, she can also be a source of disillusionment. Although some critics disagree, Miller sees his common heroes as tragic figures willing to sacrifice everything for their convictions even though their convictions are often based on false ideals or on private delusions. Willy Loman is a washed-up salesman; Eddie Carbone, a troubled longshoreman; and John Proctor, a simple farmer. Each is willing to die for his beliefs.

Miller's heroes proudly confirm their individual identity. Willy screams, "I am Willy Loman." Eddie must defend his

name, and John Proctor in *The Crucible* would rather die than lend his name to an evil cause. Naming names and accusing others is a serious offense. Dying anonymously in death camps is an abomination. Miller's heroes are not victims of inexorable social forces. Ultimately, they bear the responsibility for their own actions. Embedded in them is a sense of guilt, usually for sexual infidelity. Willy's affair in a Boston hotel room haunts him, and Proctor's adultery fills him with shame. Proctor, like Quentin, stands accused before his wife. The Puritan strain of sexual guilt, a recurring theme in American literature, is an undercurrent in Miller's work. Guilt for Miller, however, extends beyond sexual transgressions. It is centered in a more serious crime: betrayal, either of oneself or of others. Miller's characters often live in worlds of illusion and denial, and those who escape from tragedy must undergo a process of self-discovery. In Miller's cosmos, individuals must act upon their own consciences without betraying their fellow humans for private gain. His plays, which often involve litigation, put society itself on trial. In a post-Holocaust world, no one is innocent. After the Depression, a shadow has been cast on capitalism and its promise of salvation through material prosperity. Socialism, which once held out the dream of a universal brotherhood, has

given way to totalitarianism. In this fallen world, the individual must learn how to live with dignity and honesty against a backdrop of disillusionment. Although labeled a realist, Miller has experimented with a number of innovative dramatic techniques. In *Death of a Salesman*, he intersperses time sequences from the past and present without using flashbacks. In *After the Fall*, he employs expressionistic stage techniques in a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The device of a narrator in *After the Fall* and *A View from the Bridge* and the authorial comments in *The Crucible* introduce a distancing effect to his dramas.

The montage effect in *The American Clock* and the Pinteresque absurdist style employed in *Danger: Memory!* demonstrate his ability to handle a variety of dramatic styles. Miller's poetic use of idiomatic speech and his subtle deployment of dramatic symbols clearly indicate that his drama has moved far beyond photographic realism. Using a variety of approaches, Miller most often juxtaposes the past actions of his characters with the ethical dilemmas in which they find themselves. Through this technique, they are forced to define themselves in terms both of their social situations and of their moral convictions.

Death of the salesman is difficult to summarize the play in the form of a story because action in the play is not developed

chronologically. The playwright, in order to maintain the unity of time and place, follows the flash-back technique. If we want to make out the story of Willy Loman we can narrate it in the following manner. Willy Loman, an old salesman came home from one of his trips unable any longer to control his car. As soon as he comes, he is carrying two black, battered sample cases. They seem to have some ominous meaning as they weigh him down. In the dream he seems to be quite old and broken and starts shouting at his wife Linda so loud that his sons (Biff and Happy) hear him in their room upstairs where they lie sleeping. Biff is his eldest son. He has just come home from his wandering. Happy explains to his brother that their father is losing mind. Irony is shown by the contrast in the approaches of the father and the sons. The father thinks that his sons (especially Biff) are lost, the sons think contrarily, Willy says Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such personal attractiveness gets lost. And such a hard worker there is one thing about-he is not lazy. I will see him in the morning, I will have nice talk with him. I will get him a job selling. He could be big in no time. My god remember how they used to follow him around in high school. As we listen to all this Willy's elder brother Ben, also a wanderer who struck it rich is on Willy's mind and he imagines



that Ben is talking, calling to him. So Uncle Ben, carrying a valise and an umbrella, enters the forestage from around the right corner of the house. He is a stolid man, in his sixties, with a mustache and an authoritative air. He is utterly certain of his destiny and there is an aura of far places about him. He enters exactly as Willy speaks. This is his image that we see. In reality, he died recently in Africa. Happy persuades Biff to go into business with him and they plans to make good. But somehow Biff steals a fountain pen from the man namely Oliver who was to support their plan. They where to sell sports-goods manufactured by Oliver. And their father plans to get a job from his boss's son, a position where he won't have to go on the road anymore. Linda is very happy about all this. She is worried that Willy Loman may commit suicide she is very happy about Biff's coming home and about his getting together with father but pays little attention to happy But the next day everything goes wrong. Willy is told by the osg's son, to whom Willy was godfather, that he never was any goodanlesman, And the dinner which Biff and Happy are to have with their father in a Chop-house to celebrate doesn't come off because nobody has succeeded except Happy who still has a job. Willy Loman gets furious with Biff for stealing the fountain pem and Diff gets furious with Willy for imagining that Biff ever could

make good, Then Happy catches sight of a beautiful babe in the restaurant, and he her to get a girl friend, and Biff and he go off with the two of them to lay them all night, As they leave, Happy seems to so0 hia father rush into the bathroom and then come out and sink to his knees and shout and found with his first, something about giving Biff an order. In the last scene, when they get home, Linda goes into a rage and accuses Biff and Happy of whoring and killing of their father Diff gets furious and begins to attack his father while Happy stands aside and watches, as though Happy was part of an audience at a play. st as ifr is about to strike his father, he falls instead weeping into his father's armo. Willy Loman shouts "He loves me! ....That boy is going to be magnificent" Then Unole Ben scoms to call to Willy Loman. This part I strange because Happy seems to seo Ben as clearly as Willy does again as though it wero a play of Willy's mind, Willy rushes out after llen and gets killed by a car, There is a tag-ond to the play, A sad little piece "Requiem" It takes place at Willy's grave, Linda moans that she does not understand it, ospecially since they had just made the last payment on the mortgage, BifT says he is going away from the city. But Happy decides to stay in the city and be No. 1 man. The entire play bas an aura of a dream, a wish of prehistorioro portion, its strength lying in its adroit social rationalization, in

superlative disguise of the role of the younger son Happy.

All My Sons is a family tragedy in which the central event is a business man's evasion of responsibility for a decision in war-time which led to the loss of twenty-one lives. Miller was a strong critic of contemporary American Society and its values. Through his plays, he argues strongly in favour of a certain positive relationship between the individual and society against injustice, exploitation, competition and vested private interest. The play is also based on the idea of the human tendency to put one's self above all else, which causes confusion and Miller's concern with large issues of society is the key to our understanding of All My Sons. Miller's writings are set in the middle of the twentieth century and deal with some of his typical problems. In All My Sons family relations are predominant. To Keller 'nothin's bigger than the family. The son goes against his father when he sees his father's complicity in the sale of defective cylinder heads to the Army Air Force. Out of remorse, Keller shoots himself. Keller's death points to our inescapable social responsibilities. Any evasiveness or refusal is severely punished. Miller considered family a vital factor in the system of society. In his essay, 'The Family in Modern Drama' he has discussed the role of family in modern drama. He regards family as Polis. Family to him is not merely a

means to delineate the affectional ties between the members of a family and their relations, etc. "Sentimentalism", says Miller, is perfectly all right, but it is nowhere near a great challenge, and to pursue it is not going to bring us closer to the fated mission of the drama." The problem which concerns Miller is: "How many men make for himself a home in that vastness of strangers and how many he transform that vastness into a home" ? In other words, Miller in his plays, tries to find out an answer to the problem. "How can man develop for himself a transitional polis that may bridge the gap between the private home of the family and the public home of that new unity towards which he believes in the world to be moving. The common theme of Miller's plays is the individual versus society. As a dramatist, he concentrated on a single subject the struggle the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society," or in his family which is a part and unit of society. Like Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy, Miller also deals with social problems of modern men, but in a different technique. The plays of Arthur Miller belong to that school of social realism, which has dominated the theatre ever since. Ibsen produced his realistic plays like A Doll's House, Ghosts and Pillars of Society. Miller's first successful play, All My Sons shows the influence of Ibsen. Its theme may be described as the idea of guilt from the

past permeating and destroying the present. The guilty protagonist Joe Keller, and industrialist who, during the war supplied the government with a batch of faulty cylinder heads, when these brought about the death of twenty-one pilots, Keller committed the second crime of putting all the blame on his innocent manager Deever. Deever goes to jail and Keller prospers. This irony is supported by other instances that Miller affords in the examples of suffer fighting for their country and those who, staying behind flourish. But the success of Keller is not lasting. The climax of the play is the suicide of his son in the army on hearing the news of his father's crime. And Keller stripped of his sentimental defences, kills himself. These complications that Keller's crime brings about the betrayal and suffering of the innocent are vividly drawn by Miller, Miller is a staunch critic of contemporary American society and its values. He appears to be arguing strongly in favour of a certain positive relationship between the individual and society. He speaks against injustice, exploitation, competition and vested private interests. He also exposes the human tendency to put one's self above all else, which causes confusion and suffering. This suffering increases, on account of the self-interests seen in the protagonists. In *Death of a Salesman*, the same self-interest appears. Loman is propelled not by ambition for

himself but for his two sons for whom he wants every good thing. But contrary to his expectation, the sons come eventually to despise him. The hero of the other play, *The Crucible* refuses to accept the label that society tries to force on him. John Proctor, the hero of this play, dies the end and he is killed by society. His death is a kind of affirmation of In all the three plays-*Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *All My Sons*-the common theme is society versus society. In *All My Sons* get the idea of a man in the powerful grip of ambition, betray in society. Society is not entirely absolved of blame either, Miller draws up an indictment of the society too for he suggests that it is the pressures of a materialistic society that guided Keller in making a choice that anti-social. He could have admitted to the government the fact that the cylinders he supplied them were faulty. But to do so would be to lose the prestige of his business. Again, the inescapable relation between individual and society is made clear by Keller's agony when his neighbours call him "Murderer" and his elation when they respect him and accept him. It is the central point of Miller's social philosophy that society and the individual are inextricably linked In *All My Sons*, Keller's betrayal of his parental responsibility is exposed. There is a great moral in the irony that Keller who justified his conduct on the ground that he was



preserving his small business for his sons, should be exposed as a male factor by his own son. It is significant that this man who harms society, his paternal love and devotion to his family's welfare are exposed as manifestations of egotism.

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