

Arthur Miller's Moral, Social and Political Ideas

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Abstract

This article throws light on dramatic approaches of Arthur Miller, who is one of the topmost American playwrights, successfully judging together the social and the psychological aspects in his plays and his approach to playwrights and dramas itself is organic and his plays may be called realities which are also naturalistic and expressionistic. This paper neatly portrays the conflict between the individual and the society as visualized by Arthur Miller during his life span of time.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, Moral, Social and Political Ideas, humanity, social, psychological, realities, dramatic approach, philosophy, general attitude, consciousness.

What is commonly said and understood is that philosophy and literature have been interlinked from time immemorial and the importance of literature is decided not merely by how it says but more by what it says. Great literature is something that has high seriousness, i.e. has the power to contain and convey great moral and philosophical truths so as to make it reach and enrich humanity. The neo-humanists of the twentieth century have laid stress on the importance of this aspect and their chief interest in literature is to look at it as a criticism of life. The American writers like Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt started opposing Naturalism and Romanticism and the Neo-humanists with their strong sense of moral concern strove chiefly to more earnestness based on a thoughtful and dignified concept of man's nature and life.

Philosophical and moral intent in literature was emphasized by the twentieth century writers like T.S. Eliot, Allen Tale, etc., and T. S.Eliot preferred Dante to Shakespeare because the philosophy of Dante seemed to be more sound enough than that of Shakespeare. Actually literature is not philosophical knowledge getting translated into imagery and verse, but it does strongly express a general attitude towards life. Even though the close proximity between philosophy and literature is always deceptive, one cannot deny the close existence of a relationship. Despite the fact that philosophy has exercised tremendous and far-reaching influence on literature, it can no longer be denied that literature does reflect society more than philosophy. In that society influenced by literature, association or interrelation with others is as important as his own self. An individual has the need to feel others as part of his own self and his self as part of others. Obviously, this concept had its roots in the doctrine of existentialism. Though existentialism is considered as a philosophy and a cultural impulse with roots in

ancient Socratic and Biblical thought embracing a variety of styles and convictions, its chief characteristic is nothing but concern for human existence especially for the affirmation of freedom effecting refusal for dehumanizing social structures in the society.

For Sartre, Existentialism is a school of thought in which ‘all human activities are equivalent, all are destined by principle to defeat. The basic concept lies in the concrete fact that man exists. Existence is always a concrete and historically determinate situation that limits or conditions choice:

“It is true that nothing can redeem for man, the absurdity of the world where his is the only consciousness capable of being aware of itself. In spite of the fact that man is never by it, this attachment is demonstrated by the fact that consciousness, to be at all, must always be consciousness of something. The awareness of the human consciousness is its facticity, the fact of the physical to it, of the external world in all its diversity and multiplicity including other human beings” (Horton 498)

Basically an individual is in the world through his emotions so that his emotions are just his way of being in the world and these emotions may be termed as shame, fear and pride. The self-awareness in the individual transforms him into the other person, making him capable of seeing things as the other sees him, loving what the other loves, and experiencing the deeper realities of the others’ life experiences as if they were his own. This kind of transformation is bound to uplift and elevate individual to a higher plane from where he can feel that his life has attained its meaning.

Arthur Miller is one of the well-known American dramatists who have given expression to the self-awareness and search for identity in their plays. This gets reflected in almost all his plays like A view from the Bridge, The Misfits, After the Fall, Incident at Vichy and The Price. The central conflict in all the plays grows out of a crisis of identity. Each of the protagonists in these plays is suddenly confronted with a situation which he is incapable of meeting and which eventually puts his name in jeopardy. In that continuing battle, he often forgets who he is, finally his inability to answer the question who am I? Produces calamity and his ultimate downfall. Joe Keller, Willy Lowman, John Proctor and Eddie Carbone are alike caught up in a problem of identity that is normally characteristic of youth and their deaths are caused by their lack of self-understanding. In every case, this blindness is in a large measure due to their failure to have resolved the question of identity at an earlier and more appropriate time in life. Miller presents this crisis as a conflict between the uncomprehending self and a solid social or economic structure – the family, the community and the system. The drama emerges either when the protagonist breaks his connection with society or when unexpected pressures reveal that such a connection has in fact, never been even existed. Miller sees the need ‘for such a connection as absolute and the failure to achieve and maintain it is bound to result in catastrophe:

“Each of the plays written during the first period is a judgement of man’s failure to

maintain a viable connection with his Surroundings because he does not know himself. The protagonists of the earlier plays belong to a strange breed. In every instance, they are unimaginative, inarticulate, and they want to love and to be loved, but they are incapable of either giving or receiving love. They are haunted by aspirations toward a joy in life that his humdrum spirit is quite unable to realize. Yet, in spite of all these negative characteristics they do engage our imagination and win our sympathies.” (Corrigan 3-4)

In Miller’s earlier works, the heroes are involved in a struggle which results from his acceptance or his rejection of an image of himself, an image that grows out of values and the prejudices of his society. What is inherent in the plays is a kind of vague faith in man, a suspicion that the individual may finally be able to retain his integrity. The possibility appears most conventionally in the platitudes of Chris, the avenging idealist of *All My Sons* and in the kind of death John Proctor dies in *The Crucible*. *A View from the Bridge* is the last family play by Miller that relies on a seriously flawed protagonist for dramatic conflict. Eddie and his counterparts in *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* are to a considerable extent reconcilable as tragic heroes with Aristotle’s view that the proper hero for tragedy is a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by some error or frailty. In the person of Chris Keller, in *All My Sons*, he does demonstrate the cruelty of the idealist without attempting to understand its cause while in the same play he draws a picture of a war-painter without questioning a human nature which could evidence such cruelty and deceit. Again in *Death of a Salesman* he seems uncertain as to whether Willy Lowman is the victim of his own briskness or of a brutally simple minded society. Danforth in *The Crucible* brings home the point that man is essentially innocent and that the evil in him represents but a perversion of his frustrated love. Man’s complicity with evil, in himself and in his world, the fact of man’s destructive nature and the sense of guilt that must follow that knowledge, this is the thematic content of Miller’s play *After the Fall*:

“None of us is innocent; we are all born after the fall only after admitting our own defeat can we hope to progress only after admitting our own evil can we work for our own good. It is this paradoxical vision that forms the heart of the play; and it is because Miller has forced this vision

on us so relentlessly, with such dramatic intensity, that *After the Fall* can be said to be not only his greatest triumph but one of the few genuinely tragic plays of our time.” (Clinton 131)

The play offers profiles of post-lapsarian humanity, governed by the guilt of individual and collective feeling. This play *After the Fall* is an odyssey of individual anguish, a trial of a man by his own conscience, his own values, his own deeds. It is nothing but a dramatic revelation of a man who has come to realize that each one of us indeed been born after the fall of man and that, if we are ever to know ourselves, we must recognize and accept the fact that we not only have a share in the fall but perpetuate it. All of Miller’s heroes have a tremendous sense of guilt. *After the Fall* dramatizes the story of Quentin, a lawyer who has been living merely in the service of his success. Addressing an unidentified. ‘Listener’, Quentin relives and examines some of the important attachments in his life. He analyses his relationships with his father, mother and brother; he recalls his two marriages, the first to Louise, which floundered and broke on the shoals of disinterest and non-communion and the second to Maggie, which began with high hopes and the quest for love and ended in hatred, guilt, recrimination and death; and he remembers an involvement with Felice, a young woman whose idolization of him makes him realize with concurrent pangs of selfishness and shame his power over another person’s life.

To Quentin at the beginning of the play, existence has proved to be a pointless litigation.... before an empty bench. At the conclusion, after reviewing the wreckage of his life and the lives he has helped to smash, he arrives at the simple but profound realization that love and compassion are not enough, that life must be taken for the absurdity it is and that we are for all our denials very dangerous! And then wondering if the knowing is all he attempts to move beyond despair, fearfully but hopefully reaching out to the woman who waits for me. Quentin’s bewilderment concerning the meaning of his life was complicated by the contradictory titles others gave him. On the positive side, his mother saw him as ‘a light in the world’ and later admirers compared him to ‘a grand duke and god’. Negatively, he was called as ‘a merciless judge, a fraud, a stranger.’ On the whole, Quentin is a man who has fallen from the illusion of grace, the comfortable certainty of purpose. Leafing through the once tightly and handsomely bound casebook of his life, he discovers page after page, of loss, the loss of faith, the loss of love, the loss of innocence and finally the loss of identity:

“I’ve lost the sense of some absolute necessity.... It sounds foolish, but I feel unblessed unfit I begin to look at it, God when I think of what I believed, I want to hide.” (*After the Fall* 22)

Quentin has fallen because he has gradually and increasingly made himself admit what he has seen. He has witnessed the failure and betrayal of love and trust between his parents, he has recognized them in his own marriages and in the lives of his friends and finally he has observed them on a societal and corporate national level, symbolized by the sinister tower of the concentration camp. For Miller, the German concentration camp is the modern equipment of the fall from paradise, after which there can be no innocence. Quentin is moving towards the recognition of communal complicity, of a guilt that everyone shares and that equalizes all accounts. Quentin searches his real self, which is made up of the guilt and finds it when he feels about his reluctance to defend his old friend, Lou. Quentin's experience with Maggie is what convinces him that he and everybody else have it in them to be a killer. This makes up most of the second and concluding part of the play. He had been attracted to her by her loveliness, naive whimsical vitality and high spirits, making her the opposite of his rather stern and intellectually demanding first wife Louise. What follows is his finding of his real self, the end of his agonizing search for the otherness in him. His pathetic cry reveals his admission of the guilt in him:

“And I am not alone, and no man lives who would not rather be the sole survivor of this place than all its finest victims! what is the cure? who can be innocent again on this mountain of skulls? I tell you What I know! my brothers died here (He looks from the tower down at the fallen Maggie) – but my brothers built this place; our hearts have cut these stones! And what's the cure? ... No not love! I loved them all, all! And gave them willingly the failure and to death that I might live, as they gave me and gave each other, with a word, a look, a trick, a truth, a lie – and all – in love” (ATE 113)

Quentin's guilt about his second wife becomes the proof of his guilt and everybody's guilt. After the Fall juxtaposes a man's agonizing confrontation of the heart of darkness in himself and in humanity with the tenuous and illogical hope that springs not from the evasion of knowledge but from its acceptance:

“Like the protagonist of Dante's Inferno, Quentin has found himself in the middle of the journey of his life, in a dark wood where the straight-way was

lost and in the subsequent search for the way out, has come to understand his complexity in that darkness, a complicity in that darkness, a complicity centred in the phenomenon of separateness which he could hardly acknowledge in the early part of the play. His separateness however cannot wholly eradicate the fact that he still lives in a world of other men, in which choice and responsibility are implied.” (Nelson 269)

Within the context of inherent guilt and communal responsibility, Quentin acknowledges that we are all separate people, bound by choice:

“Quentin’s final vision accommodates guilt as a given human nature, responsibility as a necessity of human experience and love as the guarantee of hope.” (P 270)

Through the contemplation of his past, Quentin comes to believe that he has felt in his own mind the impulse to genuine evil and that he has come to understand the nature of universal human guilt. Miller has acknowledged a debt to Albert Camus. He undoubtedly sees the union of Quentin and Holga as the commencement of a lonely existential quest for man’s moral stability and redemption through an awareness of his complicity with Cain:

“If they and all people undertake the journey with hope, courage, love and forgiveness, there is just a chance that we may transcend mere survival within a scheme of mutual destruction.” (Stanton 172)

Incident at Vichy is an exciting drama of clash of ideas which emerges and lifts the play out of the post-second world war problems to a universal theme of humanity. Miller explores man’s relationship to justice and injustice, guilt and responsibility, separateness and commitment in a world irretrievably east of Eden:

“The play is also about today according to Arthur Miller. It concerns the question of insight, of

seeing in oneself the otherness the capacity
for collaboration with the evil one condemns.
It is a question that exists for all of us.” (Wager 13)

The play, of course, repeats Miller’s usual theme of self-knowledge under the pressure of forces both temperamental and environmental. In *All My Sons*, the self-awareness of evil impels Joe Keller to commit suicide. The suicide of Willy Lowman is the expression of tragic helplessness in Willy which transcends the limitation of material success. John Proctor’s heroic resistance to the social evil becomes convincing only in the historical context of the play. The agonizing awareness of the evil in Quentin in *After the Fall* is too passive to save Maggie. The freshness of *Incident of Vichy* consists in the play’s capacity to transform the sense of guilt into responsibility. Miller’s existential concerns are clearly delineated in *Vichy*. The play though existentialist in theme, is rationalistic in structure. Like Sartre, Miller writes about the absurd in coherent terms. The central crisis is precipitated by Nazism but Miller’s analysis of the cause of this evil is more existential than political or sociological and is expressed in terms of the Sartrean concepts of Nothingness and Dread.

The *Price* published in 1968 is also a revival in which Arthur Miller returns to and revitalizes that quite essential American family, the Lowmans. The *Price* is an intriguing play. In form and structure, it hearkens back to *All My Sons* and *The Death of a Salesman*; in its themes, it is similar to *After the Fall*. Structurally, *The Price* is a solidly constructed play made in the tradition of Ibsen, in which the conflict spirals out of an involved set of past relationships. The dialogue is basically expository and revelatory probing the past and examining a house built on lies, while simultaneously leading to a series of discoveries that shatter the illusions that have enveloped and almost suffocated the house. Here, Miller returns to his perpetual gladiatorial arena, the family in a renewed exploration of the relationship between actions and consequences, guilt and responsibility and self-preservation and commitment to others. The play dramatizes the ambivalent relationship of the two brothers Victor and Walter Franz. Illusions and rationalization are punctured by the verbal rapiers the two men wield against each other until at the end of the duel each has been laid bare to the bone of reality and forced to see some truths he has attempted to conceal. And each then departs, having gained some insight into himself, a new awareness about each, what he wanted, but what he had become, still essentially powerless to alter the role he played for more than half his life. But what is more important here is the two brothers in the cause of this fierce verbal battle find an opportunity to look into themselves, see what they are; in fact, it is a search for the otherness in them, an exploration into themselves, so as to make a self-discovery. Indeed in a sense, as Miller has suggested, *The Price* owes more to *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* than to *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, for he is more concerned with probing the nature of human freedom than with exposing the social charade.

“*Incident at Vichy* is about ‘tomorrow morning’
and *The Price* in turn about man’s continued

surrender of identity and submission to
a false concept of human nature". (Bigsby 16)

The play couples the problem of attaining success with that of being true to oneself themes which are central to all the major works of Miller. Walter, the successful surgeon, whose primary loyalty has been to himself and who had abandoned his father and brother when they needed his help, is reminded of the price he had paid to gain wealth and power. Walter's brother Victor, on the other hand, has sacrificed his chance for a professional career out of a sense of duty to the father, he felt he had to support. On the surface, the situation seems to be a recapitulation of familiar instances in which Miller has pitted rectitude against egoism. In reality, however, both brothers in looking for justification of their past have been deceiving themselves about their underlying motivations. Each brother is battling with conflicting forces in himself which remain partially incomprehensible. It is true these two brothers resemble the two in *Death of a Salesman*. In *Death of a Salesman* the two brothers, Happy and Biff, reflect the two sides of Willy's warring personality. Happy values only material things. He looks for some kind of consolation in his relationship with women and though vaguely conscious of some insufficiency measures himself solely by reference to his success in business. Biff on the other hand is aware of other values than the purely material and is capable finally of the kind of genuine humanity which Willy only approaches in moments of rare sensitivity. In *The Price* also, Miller makes use of a similar device. The two brothers represent profoundly different approaches to life-approaches which not only coexist in the world, but which constitute the basis of most individual lives. This is the significance of Walter's remark that

"We are ... brothers. It is only two seemingly
different roads. Out of the same trap, it's
almost as though ... we are like two
halves of the same guy. As though we can't
quit ... move ahead alone." (*The Price* 429).

The qualities of the two brothers are ambiguously presented. At first sight it appears to be simply a contrast between heroic self-sacrifice and callous self-interest. But beneath this public face is the naked figures. This apparent reversal of moral force is evidence of Miller's wish to penetrate to the pantheon of forces and values which must lie behind the realistic surfaces of life.

To conclude, it may be stated that almost all plays of Miller point to the playwright's firm adherence to the theatre of ideas. As an intellectual dramatist, he has used all his plays for expressing moral, social and political ideas. Just as E.M. Forster or Aldous Huxley is the novelist of ideas, so Arthur Miller is the dramatist of ideas.

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