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STATUS OF ARTHUR MILLERS'S PROTOGONISTS: AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT :

In the period immediately following the end of World War II, American theater was transformed by the work of playwright Arthur Miller. Profoundly influenced by the Depression and the war that immediately followed it, Miller tapped into a sense of dissatisfaction and unrest within the greater American psyche. His probing dramas proved to be both the conscience and redemption of the times, allowing people an honest view of the direction the country had taken.

Arthur Miller was born in Manhattan in 1915 to Jewish immigrant parents. By 1928, the family had moved to Brooklyn, after their garment manufacturing business began to fail. Witnessing the societal decay of the Depression and his father's desperation due to business failures had an enormous effect on Miller. After graduating from high school, Miller worked a number of jobs and saved up the money for college. In 1934, he enrolled in the University of Michigan and spent much of the next four years learning to write and working on a number of well-received plays.

KEYWORDS:- America , Dream, Poverty, Confusion, Violent

Introduction

The thirties in the last century was a period overshadowed by the specter of the Great Depression. It affected every sphere of life. Disillusionment, uncertainty and gloom prevailed everywhere. The gloom of that depression was gradually dissipated by the tremendous upsurge of employment and mobilization called into being by America's entry into the World War II. The forties was a time of excitement, cultural ferment, and rapid social change. People had outgrown religion , political systems and established convictions and certainties. They had been thrown into a state of bewilderment and apathy. In an age of disillusionment and uncertainty absolutes hold persuasive attractiveness. While it is true that immediate economic and social evil could be cured by this sense of corporate strength, however, it is equally true that the same panaceas were of no use for the underlying problems - the self interest and economic and social cruelty which dominated the scene and which had its origin, not in any specific social system but rather in the hearts of men. Human existence with its corruption had its impact on the playwrights and their plays bear a powerful testimony to the anguish they felt within. Nausea, claustrophobia, lack of communication - these are the dominant themes of modern drama. A disgust with life, a waiting for death and a sense of horror of emptiness all around character rise these plays. The people in them are persons cut adrift from all values venerated by tradition. It was in the twentieth century that man's faith in all accepted values had been entirely shaken. He had lost his faith in entirety and no longer did he bother about immortality. After losing its centre, the absolute, human life had become peripheral and relative. Hence, alienation from God and society had become the dominant theme of the twentieth century literature.

All the serious playwrights of America have responded to the violent disturbances of the national life - racism, urban problems, assassination and murder, poverty in the midst of plenty - by seeking to give definition to the soulscape which forms our planetary and spiritual horizons. The theme of contemporary man - confused, frustrated, even lost - prevailed before the playwrights. This frustration and despair might be attributed to social and economic causes. The First World War and the Depression brought a profound transformation in the thinking of the American artists and writers. American Theatre has acquired its identity only after 1920 and real attempts were made to create a modern drama that reflects the life of the people of the time. It has emerged out of a stereotyped theatricality and pseudo-technical virtuosity into a new theatre of significant artistic merit. The new drama has completely eschewed old archaisms and the nineteenth century platitudes. As in the case of the other parts of the world, the revolutionary thinkers like Marx, Freud and Einstein created tremendous impact on the minds of the American playwrights. The conventional ideas of the older generation into conflict with the new intellectual milieu of the younger generation and the American playwrights since O'Neill have been grappling with new problems courageously. They have come to face the realities frankly and boldly and discarded the genteel tradition. O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, Clifford Odets, Thornton Wilder, Maxwell Anderson, and Edward Albee are some of the important playwrights of the twentieth century. O'Neill, the most dominant figure of the third decade of the twentieth century, cast a long shadow on all the later dramatists. He made innumerable experiments, invented new themes, and explored new techniques. He combined elements of naturalism, expressionism, and Greek tragedy in a distinctive dramatic language of great power. His plays were born of a profound philosophic despair. He denied the argument of the futurists who found in science, not denial, but hope for mankind. He searched after the meaning and identity of life and had come to the conclusion that life is a long day's journey into night. He used powerful situations, tempestuous emotions and characters derived from everything in life. The failure of

the old faith in a world of materialism had received its due consideration from O'Neill. Except for the liberal use of slang, the language he used is more powerful and poetic than that of any other American dramatist. His three plays *The Iceman Cometh*, *The Hairy Ape* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* are a sufficient testimony to his great dramatic genius. 4 They will remain as wide and as profound as his favorite image, the sea itself. Beyond the Horizon is one of O'Neill's earliest and most well constructed plays. It is about a young dreamer who wants to cross the horizons and lead an adventurous life. Suddenly before his departure he finds out that his neighbour's daughter loves him and not his brother as was supposed generally by all people. The newly kindled love holds him back and instead of crossing the horizons he marries her and settles down on the farm. His brother who is better-fitted for farm life sails away with the cruise with which his brother should have gone away. The romance of the elder brother however burns itself out, the woman grows drab and dull, poverty and disease overtake the household. Wasted by consumption, the man at last crawls out of the hated house into the street to have a glimpse of the places beyond horizon. *The Iceman Cometh* is a devastatingly tragic play in which the ultimate struggle for freedom takes place within the mind of man himself. It shows that the so-called mankind consists of a few rakes and bums and hollow men. Different nationalities - American, African, English, German, Irish, Italian, Scottish and Negro - are ~ presented here in a dirty pub. There are pimps, barmen, and prostitutes. This, according to O'Neill, is the world. There is nothing of courage or faithfulness, no sacrifice or nobility of mind. This is a sordid world of despair and dejection. Man's insignificance, man's mortality is the essence of his tragic vision. Life is unbearable and men contrive not to look at truth. The sky is blind and the sea is cruel and they do not answer man's prayers. *The Hairy Ape* is one of the O'Neill's great plays. Both in theme and technique it makes a radical departure from the conventional plays. The principal character, Yank, the rejected man, who ends his life in an animal's cage, is the most powerful and terrifying symbol in the whole play. The play unfolds the gap between the individual and the system that is growing wider and wider and beyond control. Yank is a symbol of deep protest that rises like a wave against the artificial values of modern life. Like Yank the modern man often asks for his ~destination to which he finds no answer. Nothing - food or wages or a vote-seems to help him. The worker is a hairy ape in the hands of the capitalist class and it is a dehumanized and denaturalized crowd of empty souls. The government, the church and the whole society is at the service of the marionettes. In this society, church-going is a fashion, monkey-fur is a fashion, but sweating in a stokehole is detestable. 6 *The Long Day's Journey Into Night* is an autobiographical play with the failures, frustrations, and the grim battle of a family without the author's any overt sentimentalization. The author presents everything with composure and dignity. Each character in the play journeys from the sunny surface of happiness to heart-rending revelations of self-truth. Each holds the other responsible for his or her failure. Mary Tyrone takes to morphine with excuses of her son's health. The husband is unwilling to spend money on a good doctor as he is too self-centered to notice others' suffering. Of the sons, Edmund never feels at home with his family. He is happy so long he is on the sea and he is always a little in love with death. The other son., Jamie is always drunk and though he loves his brother he has a subconscious desire to destroy him. The play, thus, is a merciless exposure of the inner life of each member of the family.

A Biographical Sketch

"The e plays are my autobiography. I can't write plays that don't sum up where I am. I'm in all of the~. I don't know how else to go about writing."1 Arthur Miller was born on 17 October 1915, in the Harlem section of Manhattan in New York City, to a well-to-do Jewish couple. Miller's father, Isadore Miller, was a successful manufacturer of ladies' coats, and his mother, Augusta, had been a teacher in the public school which Miller attended in Harlem. He was the second of their three children, preceded by a brother, Kermit, and followed by a sister, Joan. He failed to distinguish himself as a student and was more interested in sports than in studies. The year 1929 proved to be a turning point in Miller's life. His father's business suffered due to the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the economic crisis forced the family to move to the Midwood section of Brooklyn, near Coney Island. By the mid 1940s, Miller had gained experience in many jobs as a delivery boy for a bakery, as a dishwasher and waiter, as a singer on a local radio station, as a warehouse clerk, as a night editor of a university newspaper, as a mouse attendant in a laboratory, as a truck driver, as a tanker seaman, as a factory laborer, as a ship fitter's helper, and a writer of over thirty radio plays and movie scenarions. It helped him to become a diligent person, and enriched his storehouse of wisdom. It was during this period that he read a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* under the impression that it was a detective story. The book made a lasting impact on him and he made up his mind to become a playwright. Having saved just enough money for one semester, he entered the University of Michigan, and was able to complete the course with the financial help from the National Youth Administration, and with a salary earned as night editor of the *Michigan Daily*, and with an occasional prize won by his writing. "He plunged into playwriting as if he had been born to the theater,"2 and won Michigan's Avery Hopwood Award twice. One of these prize winning plays "The Grass Still Grows" (an unpublished play) also won Theater Guild National Award of \$ 1250 in 1937. Miller received his B.A. in 1938 in English, and returned to New York to work with the Federal Theater Project. Thereafter he turned to writing for radio as well as to working in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and in a box factory. He wrote *Listen My Children*, and *You're Next* with Norman Rosten. Federal Theater was shut down and he had to go on relief. 39 In 1940, he travelled to North Carolina to collect dialect speech for the folk division of the Library of Congress. He married Mary- Grace Slattery whom he had met earlier at college. A son (Robert) and a daughter (Jane) were born of this union, which, however, ended in a divorce in June 1956. In 1944, Miller toured army camps collecting background material for the screenplay "The Story of G.I. Joe." He shaped this material into a book of reportage and personal impressions that he published under the title *Situation Normal*. He published another novel *Focus* in 1946. His first Broadway production *The Man Who Had All the Luck* was premiered on November 23, 1944 but closed after four performances. In 1947, he won Drama Critics Award for the season's best play of American authorship. This award came ~ 1/ *All My Sons* which revolves round his basic concept of moral responsibility in family and society, linking it to the inner struggle of men in authority during the war. The promise of *All My Sons* was more than fulfilled when *Death of a Salesman* was produced on Broadway on February 10, 1949, and ran for 742 performances. The play revolves around the last twenty-four hours in the life of Willy Loman, the hard-working sixty-three-year-old travelling salesman whose dreams and 40 fantasies of success and wealth are accompanied by failure and disillusionment in his professional and private life. Willy is pricked by his guilty conscience for having an affair with the Woman and throughout his life he tries to regain his lost respect and love in the eyes of his elder son Biff. Considering that in death he may provide for his family and son what he never could in his lifetime, he commits suicide to provide bright future to Biff. The play thrust Miller into the peak of his career and he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Antoinette Perry Award, the Donaldson Award, and the Theater Club

Award. In the same year New York Times published "Tragedy and the Common Man" (essay). He attended the pro-Soviet Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to chair an arts panel with Odets and Dmitri Shostakovich. Miller's fluent, streamlined, colloquial adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* was produced on Broadway on 28 December 1950. In 1952, he visited the Historical Society "Witch Museum" in Salem, to research for *The Crucible* and this original play *The Crucible* (1953) won the Antoinette Perry and Donaldson Award for the dramatist. It makes use of history as an allegory to depict a contemporary situation. The story takes us back to the America of the 17th century where there was widespread fear of witchcraft. The protagonist of the play John Proctor, is falsely accused of witchcraft and there is a trial during which much of the evil and hypocrisy of the orthodox society are exposed. In 1954 he was denied passport by State Department to attend opening of *The Crucible* in Brussels because of his alleged support of the Communist movement. On 29 June 1956, Miller married the glamorous film actress Marilyn Monroe. The marriage lasted only four years and in 1962, he married Miss Ingeborg Morath, a photographer of Austrian birth. In 1957 he was indicted on charges of contempt of the Congress for refusing to name suspected Communists and in 1958 US Court of Appeals reversed contempt of the Congress conviction. He was awarded Gold Medal for Drama by National Institute of Arts and Letters in the same year.

CONCLUSION

While dealing with the historical event Miller transcended it beyond the particular and invested it with universal significance for 192 the play deals with the perennial conflict between individual conscience and civil society. The practice of universal evil and wrong doing was operating in the guise of a social good. People took it as an opportunity to serve their personal ends. Fanaticism of the judges destroyed their reason and justice failed as a consequence of it. The evil of repression and witch-hunting was in full swing, destroying several innocent victims, and the protagonist has to challenge this evil prevalent in the contemporary society. John Proctor holds a respectable position in his community. He is straight forward and somewhat unrefined in his ways. He accuses Parris of too much love for money, hellfire sermons, and the right of authority. He explains that it is these faults of Parris that have kept many including John Proctor himself, from attending church recently. The play revolves round John Proctor's search for his soul, his identity, his integrity, and his "name" for he lost his soul when he lusted with Abigail Williams. Every move of John Proctor seems to be motivated by guilt feeling. The main line of motivation in the play is represented by John Proctor's inner torment of conscience. Elizabeth, who being a good woman, is supposed not to tell a lie even to save her husband's life, does lie to protect him. To the great disappointment of John Proctor, the lie of Elizabeth is believed and the truth of Proctor is rejected. Even after Proctor's arrest his identification with the accused is not yet complete. He suffers with them for months in prison. There is a continuous struggle going on in the mind of Proctor as whether to choose principle or compromise, death or life without honor. When he has to make a final choice between death and confession, his guilt as an adulterer becomes confused with his innocence as witch; one sin against society comes to look like another. He is perpetually haunted by his sense of guilt as an adulterer and this is why he agrees to confess. He prefers to live by telling a lie that is not a lie rather than die for a truth that is not truth. He knows too well that he is a sinner and, therefore, cannot mount the gibbet as a saint along with innocent people like Rebecca. He also knows the futility of dying for a sin which he never committed. After a long period of repercussion John is able to overcome his inner conflict and move to a position of final defiance of the court in order to maintain his identity and his integrity that is to him of a paramount importance dearer even than his existence. John Proctor, otherwise an ordinary adulterer, attains in the end a heroic stature, by his concern for his identity and integrity. 194 *A View from the Bridge* is a drama of passion in which Miller explores novel aspects of human personality- that is the hidden forces of passion and instinct. Eddie Carbone, the protagonist, is a victim of an unknown and uncontrollable passion for his wife's niece Catherine, to whom he has raised and for whom he shows a strong protective paternal attitude. The presence of the hidden forces gradually drives him to a crucial point in his life, where he dies crying out for his "name" like the protagonist of Miller's earlier play *The Crucible*. In writing *A View from the Bridge* Miller intended to write a kind of a Greek tragedy. He chose his characters from the Sicilian background and introduced a narrator who comes to the stage from time to time and addresses the audience as does the chorus in the Greek tragedies to provide a narrative background to the play. The play, like the Greek tragedy upon which it is modelled, deals with timeless themes that do not require any specific cultural echoes for their development. In the earlier plays of Miller man is sometimes shown to be a victim of external forces beyond his control but in this play Eddie is portrayed as a victim of the dark forces working from within, affecting his reactions to events and thus leading him to his eventual downfall. He never realizes the true cause of his doom. Eddie Carbone lives by the norms of his society and is a man of principles. He values self-respect and believes in honorable actions. The core of the play is formed by the relationship between Eddie and Catherine. Like all other heroes of Miller, Eddie is also obsessed. Eddie tries to convince his wife that Rodolpho is not a worthy suitor to Catherine. Eddie's response to the situation shows the depth of his turmoil. Eddie thinks that he is only trying to save his niece from a disastrous marriage. The doomed attraction of Eddie for Catherine not only precipitates social crisis but intensifies his own turmoil and suffering also. Eddie has been harbouring in his mind the illusion of Catherine being a little girl always in need of his protection but when he discovers Catherine and Rodolpho alone in the compartment his illusion is shattered. The lawyer urges Eddie to let Catherine go. He tries his best to dissuade Eddie not to follow the self-destructive course of action and warns him. When Eddie's passion derails conviction, when his principles give way to self-interest and emotional excess, when there is no way out to secure his integrity, he turns a reformer, deserting his own long-held beliefs. Marco, who has a strong motivation to abhor Eddie as the latter has betrayed him, reveals his contempt by spitting into Eddie's face publicly and thus hurts his self-esteem and dignity. Eddie becomes exasperated at the loss of his honor and dignity, and makes wild demands to retrieve his good 196 "name" from Marco. He threatens to kill Marco. Thus, to restore his lost dignity and honour becomes the ultimate concern of Eddie. For Eddie Carbone his name becomes the symbol of ultimate dignity and his almost self-invited death seems to be a rite of self-purification and a way of coming to terms with his family and society at large. The ending of the play is thus tragic in the best classical sense. Eddie is destroyed through his tragic flaw, his ignorance of his own passions, and through his sin of betraying Rodolpho and Marco to Immigration authorities. It is the integrity of Eddie's effort to win his self-esteem and the integrity of his passion that makes us respond to his fate with a certain awe, if not with admiration. In his long Introduction to *Collected Plays* Arthur Miller indicates his involvement with three stylistic modes prevalent in modern drama, which may be labeled the realistic, the expressionistic and the rhetorical. Basically Miller is a realist, and his technique might be described as naturalism. He deals with the typical and outwardly normal in American life, and his style is straight-forward and vernacular. He intentionally creates characters who are ordinary instead of extraordinary. But his realism is not simple.

It is a complex form of art, a technique that uses in one form or another most of the devices developed by the experimentalists of the Twenties: the free verse of Maxwell Anderson, the fluidity in space and time of the Expressionists, the breaking-down of the audience barrier of Brecht, Wilder and others, and the inner psychological analysis of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. His plays demonstrate the process of filtering-down through which the radical experiments of avant-garde literature eventually reach and influence popular art. A series of allusions that gradually reveal a hidden sin brings about the transition from tranquility to fear an Ibsenesque technique that Miller was to employ in later plays. *All My Sons*, for two acts an extremely well constructed work, reveals clearly what is evident in almost every play. Miller has written - the habit of following a carefully prepared movement to crisis with an anticlimactic denouement. His desire to formulate "social" truths has constricted his talent for capturing inward urgencies in colloquial language. The structure of *Death of a Salesman* is Miller's initial departure from severe realism. In it there is a perfect integration of expressionism and realism. In it a realistic-expressionistic synthesis exists both thematically and structurally. It has a logical consistency and an original structure that other plays lack. It is unsurpassed in its construction and power of situation. In it there is a harmonious blending of realism with non-realistic or expressionistic stylization. Miller is using the technique solely as a means of revealing the character of Willy Loman, the values Willy holds and, particularly, the way his mind works. The technique, practised effectively in *All My Sons* and given additional flexibility by the temporal and spatial fluctuations in *Death of a Salesman*, can be easily observed in the first act card game between Charley and Willy. *All My Sons* represented a compromise between an explicit moralist and a realistic "geometry" of causation; *Death of a Salesman* represented a compromise between rhetorical, realistic and expressionistic modes. Miller's experimentation with expressionistic, realistic, and rhetorical styles, then, has been conditioned by his overriding desire to declare objective truths about man in society. In each work hidden guilt is first referred to covertly, then bared in a climactic revelation. The secrets and the methods with which they are brought to light vary. Revelation ensures a surprising transition from one issue to another. As the secret comes into view, an antagonism developed at the beginning of each play gives way to a more urgent opposition. Miller employs two kinds of narrative techniques. One of them is the traditional method where the story progresses through dialogue as in *All My Sons*, *The Crucible* and *The Price*. The other is a technique which is closer to the interior monologue, where the story unfolds itself through a process of loud thinking on the part of the protagonist as, for instance, in *Death of a Salesman* and *After the Fall*. In Miller the selection of an art form is always determined by the subject matter in hand. The form that expresses the subject matter in the best possible way is usually the form best suited to the play. Realism has been frequently used to express more personal and familiar relationships and its language is invariably prose, whereas a more poetic or symbolic or expressionistic style is used to express social relationships. Miller combines the realistic and non-realistic modes by juxtaposing the familial and the social relationships in the plays. Miller's construction, if rarely flawless, is never formless. His metaphors, if sometimes obvious, are sometimes subtle. It is the dialogue that swings between extremes of brilliance and insipidity. Colloquial speech may be heard in an amazing variety of accents. Miller's best dialogue mirrors psychological conditions, yet he constantly returns to the formal generalization; he can skillfully manipulate emotional tension, yet he seeks esthetic detachment; his figures act most intelligibly in a family context, yet he feels obliged to make explicit their connection with a social environment. Whether in historical, regional, or foreign dialect Miller's dialogue is most telling when it works by implication, not by explication.

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