Arthur Miller's Tragic Heroes

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Abstract
Arthur Miller's heroes, found in dramas like "All My Sons," "Death of a Salesman," "The Crucible," and "A View from the Bridge," are ordinary individuals shaped by the American Dream's complexities. Miller, deeply engaged in contemporary social issues, explores the interplay between the individual and society, emphasizing personal responsibility. Unlike classical tragic heroes, Miller's protagonists face struggles rooted in societal dynamics rather than external fate. "All My Sons" depicts Joe Keller's moral dilemma, "Death of a Salesman" explores Willy Loman's tragic pursuit of success, "The Crucible" examines John Proctor's clash with conscience, and "A View from the Bridge" portrays Eddie's disintegration. Miller's heroes, flawed yet relatable, reflect the human condition's complexities.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, Tragic Heroes, American Dream

Miller's heroes are ordinary human beings. They are the real products of the great American Dream. As the dramas of Arthur Miller are realistic, their heroes are naturally real men of the real society. Of the six writers representing the American Theater, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Clifford Odets and Arthur Miller, Miller is the one who participates most actively in the social life of today. He keeps his eyes open to the people around him. He is preoccupied with the relationship between the individual and the society with all its forces of politics, money and industry. Miller's usual themes are the relationship of the individual to society. He also shows the personal responsibility that any individual owes to society and society to the individual. Thus, his heroes are individuals who are influenced by the society or who influence the society by their actions. They are social creatures who are accountable for their actions towards the society.

Miller's tragic heroes are not Aristotelian in the strict sense of the term. The Greek idea is considered archaic in the modern context of social tragedy. In modern times the old Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero is considered irrelevant, as the very nature of modern tragedy has undergone tremendous change, as Miller himself writes,

"In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another we are often held to be below tragedy—or tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words, it is most often implied."[1]

According to the classical conception, the tragic hero is placed against forces which are beyond his power and control. These forces are often named as Fate or Destiny. But in modern drama it is 'the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society' that is the major subject of representation. The essential dramatic situation in all his plays is that "his characters find themselves firmly and inexorably

[1] *Tragedy and the Common Man*, p. 3.

planted within a family structure which is turn reflects pressures of society at large".[2] From this point of view, Miller suggests that his play *All My Sons* should be seen. This tragedy is "a play, which is meant to become part of the lives of its audience—a play seriously meant for people of common sense, and relevant to both their domestic lives and their daily work, but an experience which widens their awareness of connection—the filaments to the past and the future which lie concealed in life."[3]

The hero of *All My Sons*, Joe Keller, a business man with a limited vision, is caught in the quagmire of the materialistic values of a society the key of which is money-success. As the play opens Jim Keller and his neighbor Frank are seen talking on general affairs of the day. It is learnt that Larry Keller, the older son of Joe, fought as a pilot in the Second World War. He was reported missing and presumed to be dead, though his mother Kate still believes that her son would return one day.

Joe Keller and his business partner Steve Deever owned a factory engaged in the business of manufacturing cylinder heads for the Army Air force planes during the war. Incidentally, a batch of the cylinder heads proved to be defectively manufactured. However, their defect was ignored and they were passed O.K. by the factory and supplied to the Air Force. This supply of defective parts proved fatal resulting in the death of twenty-one American pilots. Consequently, a court case was instituted against both the partners who were eventually convicted. However, Joe Keller got the benefit of doubt and was subsequently released, but Steve Deever was imprisoned. But the neighbors and acquaintances still believed that Joe was guilty.

Chris, the second son of Joe Keller, is full of remorse and disillusionment. He feels that the dead pilots have sacrificed their lives for the sake of nothing, and in this world, life is going on as before, as if nothing has happened. The values of co-operation and mutual responsibility which they had built up by their actions had been lost. Chris feels that people have lost all values and meaning of life. He is pained to see the loss and deterioration of moral values in this world of business. He realizes that the world is too much with us and we are running but the rat-race. The following words reveal Chris's deep-rooted anguish,

"I felt—what you said—ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator, I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you've got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you've got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise, what you have is really loot, and there's blood on it. I didn't want to take any of it."[4]

George, the son of the convicted partner Steve, comes to know that Joe, and not his father Steve is the real culprit. It was Joe who had asked Steve "to weld, cover up the cracks in any way he could, and ship them out". George has also come to know the fact that Joe Keller had promised to take the responsibility, but when they were prosecuted, Keller cunningly saved himself. This revelation shocks Joe's son Chris also who feels that his world has collapsed. Every child sees an image of an ideal person in his father. But the illusions of Chris about an ideal father are shattered. He is totally disillusioned. He has lost faith in the world in which people like his father live and prosper. He, in a gust of rage, leaves the house.

However, Kate, Joe's wife, is a righteous woman. She asks her husband to accept his guilt before his son and take the whole responsibility upon his head. Only then Chris can be brought back. Keller, however, maintains that he had done everything for the sake of his family. By now Chris himself returns and tells his mother that he is going to leave them forever. A letter written by Larry is produced which makes the situation more intense and tragic,

[2] Atma Ram, p.4
[3] *Introduction to Collected Plays,* pp. 16-17.
[4] *All My Sons,* p. 85.

"I can't bear to live any more—I'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me missing".[5]

Every son looks into his father an ideal person. He looks for moral support in his father. But when this vision of a support is crumbled, the son is naturally upset, and the situation creates a disbelief in this very world of relationships. This happens with Chris Keller. When he hears the story of his father's crime from Steve Deever, his respect and moral attitude towards his father is shattered. This puts a question mark to the concept of morality in the mind of Chris, who refuses to be a party to his father's crime. The image of an ideal father and an embodiment of ethical code that he had been so far cherishing in his mind now become faint and tarnished. Everything now seems to stink of the blood of the twenty-one pilots who died and also Larry. There is now seen a breach in the father-son relationship, as seen in the following dialogues,

Chris : *quietly, incredibly:* How could you do that ? How ?

Keller : What's the matter with you !

Chris : Dad…..Dad, you killed twenty-one men !

Keller : What, killed ?

Chris : You killed them, you murdered them.

Keller, *as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris:* How could I Kill anybody ?

Chris : Dad ! Dad !

Keller, *trying to hush him:* I didn't kill anybody !

Chris : Then explain it to me. What did you do ?

Explain it to me or I'll tear you to pieces !"[6]

Miller's next great hero is Willy Loman in the tragedy entitled *Death of a Salesman*. In fact, this tragedy stands apart from almost all other works of Arthur Miller. It "was written", as Neil Carson observes "in almost a single burst of creative inspiration, from personal experience, not from a compassionate tolerance not always found in Miller's work. It is one of the few instances when the playwright has projected himself into a character quite unlike himself, writing in this play from the point of view of the father rather than the alienated son and it is Miller's most successful attempt at creating individual characters with universal significance."[7]

Willy Loman, the hero, is an aging carpenter turned salesman who has at one time been prosperous, but now is approaching the end of his professional career. Willy's story is peculiar in that, in order to cope with his failures in life, he retreats to the past in his mind and gradually loses touch with reality. He tries to relive the good times, but keeps coming up against things that have gone wrong. He fails to understand and compromise with the nature of the present. When Loman, after a life-time with the same company, loses his job, he becomes desperate. His depression is exacerbated by the guilt he feels from a past infidelity which has estranged him from his older son, Biff. Rather than accept that his life has been a failure, and that Biff is not interested in big business, Loman decides to commit suicide in the hope that the insurance money will help Biff become successful.

Willy Loman is a common man. His fault is that he is a dreamer. The dreams cannot always be realized in practice. But Miller has transformed this tragedy of a particular dreamer into a play that projects the dreams of the average humanity. *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy in which we all are made partakers of what happens in the drama. Miller manages to transcend individual tragedy to include us all in his summation of what is wrong with our world. It is different from the earlier, All *My Sons* in that while this family drama ends with "a moral tag that we are all one family and that a selfishness which is prepared to destroy others

[5] *All My Sons,* p. 126.
[6] Ibid., p. 114.
[7] *Arthur Miller,* p.44.

leads to self-destruction, in *Death of Salesman* Miller blames and makes society responsible for all human tragedy. It leaves us with Charley's concluding remark in the last Act, 'Nobody dart blame this man. A Salesman is got to be a dream boy'."[8]

Willy Loman's tragedy is the tragedy of 'Everyman' placed in the mire of modern society. In the transitional phase he is unable to move with the times. His brother warns him to adjust himself to the changed circumstances—"Time, William, time!…The boat. We'll be late."[9] But Willy is incapable of making a compromise and so fails in life. That way Willy is a misfit in the American society. Miller seems to float the message that "only those survive who have the capacity to settle for half and a man who is unwilling to remain passive when his dignity is challenged cannot preserve his life."[10] Willy Loman is the spokesman of the playwright in this way. Miller throws light on the situation of Willy Loman,

"I think Willy Loman is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life which the machine civilization deprives people of. He is looking for his self-hood, for his immortal soul, so to speak, and people who don't know the intensity of the quest think he is odd, but a lot of salesman, in a line of work where ingenuity and individualism are acquired by the nature of the work, have a very intimate understanding of his problem; more so, I think, than literary critics who probably need strive less after a certain point……Willy is a bab….Willy is a victim."[11]

Willy is a victim of contemporary American ethics. He has been victimized by the merciless and 'unfeeling' social system which drives people to frantic and cut-throat competition for success. Willy is doomed not only by the grandiose nature of these dreams but also by their inherent contradictoriness. As a social victim, Willy is given his elegy in the last scene by his friend and neighbour, Charley, who, ironically, has succeeded within the American system by a kind of indifference and lack of dream. Charley points out that a sales man must 'dream' of great things if he is to travel the territory 'way out there in the blue.' But Charley also points out that a salesman is a man who really has no trade like the carpenter, lawyer, or doctor, so that when the bright smile that has brought him his success begins to fade, he must fall. And it is this that happens with Willy Loman as Charley says,

"Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine."[12]

Willy rises to his tragic stature because of his passion for self-respect. With a salesman, such as Willy Loman, Miller has created a true tragedy. Willy is "the most representative member of our commercial society."[13] He has been portrayed as a realistic, believable and heart-breaking man—"a human and pathetic figure."[14] We might very well say that *Death of a Salesman* is the tragedy of a common man and the average American and it is rightly said that "many Americans, from all walks of life have identified themselves or their relatives with Willy."[15] Willy Loman has tremendously powerful ideals and values to which he tries to stick very sincerely. It is because these values cannot be realized, that he is driven to a sort of madness. Miller defends Willy on this ground,

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[8] *M. W. Steinberg,* 'Arthur Miller and the Idea of Modern Tragedy', in *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays,* p. 90.

[9] *Death of a Salesman* , p. 219.

[10] Urmila Varma, 'Modernity as a Theme and Technique in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman',* in *Perspectives on Arthur Miller*, p. 93.

[11] *On Social Plays*, p. 59.

[12] *Death of Salesman,* pp. 221-222.

[13] Henry Popkin, *Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter,* p.49.

[14] Quoted by A. Nicoll, *The Theatre and Dramatic Theory* , p.94.

[15] John Prudhoe, *Arthur Miller and Tradition of Tragedy*, English Studies, vol. 4.3, No.5.Oct 1962, p. 437.

"The fact is that he has values. The fact that they cannot be realized is what is driving him mad, just as, unfortunately, it is driving a lot of other people mad. The truly valueless man, the man without ideals, is always perfectly at home anywhere because there cannot be conflict between nothing and something. Whatever negative qualities there are in the society or in the environment don't bother him because they are not in conflict with any positive sense that he may have. I think Willy Loman is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life which the machine civilization deprives people of."[16]

The protagonist in *The Crucible* is John Proctor who is a farmer, a man of substance in the community. He is a respected member of the community. He is clear and straightforward in his dealings with his neighbors and others. For example, when he comes looking for the servant girl, he says, "I'll show you a great doing on you arise one of these days. Now get you home; my wife is waiting' with your work!"[17]

Proctor does not behave like the traditional hero of a tragedy. He is neither a great man, nor a grave-faced hero of the tragedy. He is a different kind of a hero. He has some kind of romantic notions. For example, he is a lover of nature. In his first scene with Elizabeth, he expresses his liking for flowers when he says to her, "you ought to bring some flowers in the house."[18] He also proposes for a walk around the farm,

"It's winter in here yet on Sunday let you come with me, and we'll walk the farm together; I never see such a load of lowers on the earth----"[19]

That Miller's tragedies are mostly family dramas is evident from the fact that as a tragic hero Proctor is committed to his family, i.e., his wife Elizabeth. But Proctor's case is different from that of either Joe Keller of Willy Loman. In comparison with Joe and Willy, he is eight years ahead. From being a marginal farmer living on the outskirts of Salem, he gets involved and becomes a reactional humanist breaking the alliance of the State and the Church. "The spirit and the psychic have come together in him. In terms of the spiritual psychic and familiar values dear to Miller, *The Crucible's* protagonist has them; he has in Sri Aurobindo's term, 'integral consciousness.' He has awakened to the spirit, to its beauty, to the purity and grandeur of truth; unlike Joe Keller, he brings it down to the psychic, and dies espousing his cause."[20]

The hero in a tragedy suffers the fall on account of his 'flaw' or so to say, 'tragic trait'. In the case of Proctor this trait is of a different kind. It cannot be called a tragic trait in the usual sense of the term. In fact, Proctor suffers because of his guilt. Like other heroes of Miller, he too cannot escape the consequences of his past deed. Proctor committed adultery with Abigail eight month prior to trials. When rejected, Abigail's lust turns into hate and in order to take revenge, she invents the devil and the witches. On the other hand, Elizabeth, Proctor's wife, forced with supreme sacrifice, "discards her puritan inheritance and kisses her husband passionately and freely, finding freedom in unrepressed emotional fullness."[21]

Proctor's tragedy is the tragedy of human conscience and as Darshan Singh Maini has observed, "Perhaps in no other play of Miller's is the issue of conscience so powerfully dramatized as in *The Crucible.*"[22] It is a powerful tragedy in which Miller has created a belief that man, in spite of his terror, is capable of enduring everything for his sense of decency. Through the tragedy surrounding Proctor, the playwright has universalized the tragic theme, though in a different manner. The play explores the complex relations between moral good and evil. This complex relation manifests itself in the interaction between the social

[16] *Morality and Modern Drama*, p. 198.
[17] *The Crucible*, p. 239.
[18] *The Crucible.*, p.262.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 262.
[20] Som P. Ranchan, 'Four Protagonists of Miller and Integral Consciousness', in *Perspectives on Arthur Miller,* p.22.
[21] Pramila Singh. P.90.
[22] 'The Moral Vision of Arthur Miller,' in *Indian Essays in American Literature*, p. 90.

self of the protagonist and his conscience. As Porter remarks, the "motivations and the actions flow from them in relation to the guilt or innocence of individuals and of the community."[23] Miller himself suggests that this play concerns itself with true evil, and its characters are like figures in a morality play. The questions of moral good and evil are involved. Besides this, *The Crucible* shows the irresolvable paradox of the complicated relation between individual and society. The hero, instead of being a representative of his society, stands out against it, and lies because he is not sufficiently separated from values that endure. Miller has brought out a play about an accused man who refuses to name his comrades and dies rather than agrees to make a confession against innocent people.

In this play, Miller explores the human psyche—the problem of sin and the problem of conscience. On the one hand, he floats the idea of evil which reminds us of Iago,

"I believe merely that, from whatever cause, a dedication to evil, not mistaking it for good, but knowing it as evil and living it as evil, is possible inhuman beings who appear agreeable and normal."[24]

On the other hand Proctor has been presented as different in many respects from the traditional tragic heroes. He is struggling to overcome his small hesitations and hypocrisy. Proctor refuses to accept the label that his society tries to force on him. He dies and his society kills him but his death is a kind of triumph and affirmation of the individual. Thus Proctor is a unique creation of Miller. His transformation from the level of ordinary mortal to something like a saintly stature lends him a tragic grandeur towards the end of the play. Maini rightly says about him, "John Proctor in this respect stands unique against Miller's creations, not because of any inherent superiority but because of the intensity of his moral response."[25]

Eddie, the hero of *A View from the Bridge* is shown as a failed husband.

Some question marks have been put before the name of Eddie as a tragic hero. Eddie's dramatic personality gives tragic intensity through the process of disintegration. But the question is 'disintegration of what?' In fact a tragic hero, in order to fall must have attained some 'height'. Does Eddie possess that 'height'? Pramila Singh has thrown some significant light on this aspect of the character of Eddie. She asks, "Does his (Eddie's) suffering strike a responsive chord in the heart of the modern audience? How far is the sordid behaviour consistent with the sublime nature of tragedy?"[26] According to Arthur Gunj, Miller has not tried to make Eddie significant by making him a man of heroic stature or by setting him against a remorseless fate, but by giving him a kind of innate self-admiration which is undeserved since Eddie has, in fact, been guilty of a very shoddy crime.[27] In the same vein, Richard Findlater also considers Eddie Carbone "unfit as the hero of the tragedy, no matter how modern the dress or how democratic the century."[28]

In *After the Fall* Quentin, the hero, clings to his values. The theme of this play is the fall of Quentin from the innocence to the depth of the awareness of guilt in him. As has been earlier observed, most of Miller's plays show the author's obsession with good name, law and authority, self and society, etc. But in *After the Fall* Miller has tried to dramatize the trial of his own conscience in terms of some of his concrete and intimate experiences. It is "the most personal play of Miller in which he identifies himself with Quentin".[29]

Through the character of Quentin, Miller discusses failure instead of highlighting ideals. The play is a trial of a man by his own conscience. Quentin, a successful New York Lawyer in his forties, ruminates over his past life and explores it in terms of the concrete evidences of the guilt in him and relates them to the universal evil, the destructive element in human nature. Gifted with a power of insight which distinguishes

[23] *Myth and Modern America Drama*, p. 184.
[24] *Introduction to Collected Plays*, p.44.
[25] 'The Moral Vision of Arthur Miller,' in *Indian Essays in American Literature*, p.91
[26] *Arthur Miller and His Plays*, p. 139.
[27] 'The Silence of Arthur Miller' in *Drama Survey*, 3.2 (Fall, 1963), p. 234.
[28] Quoted by Pramila Singh, p. 140.
[29] Pramila Singh, p. 149.

him from his forerunners, he traces in his life the seeds of despair and the possibilities for hope. Quentin knows about this duality in his character and he expresses his feelings thus,

"A life, after all, is evidence…you know more and more I think that for many years I looked at life a case at law, a series of proofs…But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That I was moving on an upward path toward some elevation, where God knows what—I would be justified, or even condemned a verdict on any way."[30]

The hero of a Miller drama is a peculiar creature, different from many people in several aspects. Very often he is "unimaginative, inarticulate and physically nondescript, if not downright unattractive."[31] His roles as husband and father are of paramount importance to him, and yet he fails miserably in both. He wants to love and be loved, but he is incapable of either giving or receiving love. And he is haunted by aspirations toward a joy in life that his humdrum spirit is quite unable to realize. But there is other side of the picture too. In spite of some negative characteristics, Miller's heroes do engage our imagination and succeed in winning our sympathies. This is, perhaps, due to the fact that Miller himself is able to overcome contradictions in his conception. On the one hand, he finds his heroes guilty of their failure to maintain or fulfil their role within the established social structure; on the other hand, while it is certainly true that the system is ultimately affirmed, it cannot be denied that the system is shown to be in some ways responsible for creating those very conditions which provoke the protagonist's fall. M. W. Steinberg also throws light on this aspect of Miller's heroes, "Miller sees the human situation as the product of forces outside the individual person and the tragedy inherent in the situation as a consequence of individual's total onslaught against an order that degrades."[32]

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