

Arthur miller's modern tragedy

Literature



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This essay is a view on the tragedy and the common man, primarily circling around *Death of a Salesman* and *All my Sons*. It's divided into three parts. First we'll talk about Arthur Miller and his life and what could have motivated to write these plays, the second will be an analytical view of his plays. And the third part will give detailed idea on why it can be called a tragedy. The structure of tragedy has been altered time to time to suit the timeline of the society.

The time when Arthur Miller writes the social scenario is rational and more psychoanalytical, hence the subject of the tragic hero also changes, from being a conventional tragic hero from a high status. Arthur Miller's plays have a common man as the tragic hero. This paper will elaborate on the views of Arthur Miller and his idea of a tragic hero. We will keep in mind the timeline and the scenario of the society and the country of the time Miller wrote his plays to understand the idea behind the plays. Basic theme in both his plays *Death of a Salesman* and *All my sons* is related to the almighty illusion of American dream. The dream which plays a major role in downfall of both tragic figures, Willy Loman and Joe Keller.

Life of Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915 in New York and died on February 10, 2005 in Connecticut, United States. He is a very well-known playwright and essayist; he got immensely popular during late 1940s to early 1960s. Arthur Miller's family was a victim of the Economic fall, he belonged to a very wealthy family, his father owned a women's clothing manufacturing company and had around 400 employees, they had all the wealth, a summer house etc. But because of the Market Crash they lost almost

everything and Miller had to deliver bread before attending school in order to help his family, and had to do several menial jobs to pay up for his college tuition fees.

What is a tragedy?

According to the dictionary tragedy is “ A play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character.” Tragedy is basically the downfall of the hero, for the actions he has taken in the past, or some fallacy in him, causing him his misfortune. According to Aristotle in poetics;

“ Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action of high importance, complete and of some amplitude; in language enhanced by distinct and varying beauties; acted not narrated; by means of pity and fear effectuating its purgation of these emotions.” However, the definition of tragic hero has changed from the Ancients and the Elizabethan times to now. Both these times[Elizabethan and the Greeks] potrays the tragic hero as a man of rank and high stature, a king or a noble man, on whom the entire nation depended, but in modern times the hero of the tragic fall especially in Miller plays is the common man, under the pressure of society, illusions, and liar to himself and the society.

The notable differences between the three timeline is that the ancients had a religious aspect playing a major role in it, and the fate of the gods did matter a lot, the Elizabethan or especially Shakespearean tragedies were self-inflicted, because of the tragic hero's one quality that makes him powerful and weak. Modern times the tragedy surely is self-inflicted, but it is more society oriented, and man thinking in term of keeping his status in the

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society. The hero in both Greeks and Elizabethan period are the same, coming from high ranks, but the in the modern tragedy it has drastically changed, portraying the hero from a common class.

I am only keeping Arthur Miller in picture and not everyone in the modern times to justify the characteristics of the tragic hero as the common man. Ultimately tragedy what in general is that which depicts the down fall of the protagonist after a lengthy suffering of him, provoking the emotions of pity and fear in the audience. Arthur Miller's idea of tragedy

In Arthur Miller's essay, " Tragedy and the Common Man," he outlines his ideas on what a tragedy and tragic hero are today. He says that the tragic hero does not have to be a king or of a noble background, but instead, the common man can be considered a tragic hero. Miller makes the point that the tragic flaw is the idea that the tragic hero is unable to accept anything that may affect their status or self-image. Miller also states that tragedy is not supposed to be pessimistic, but rather an optimistic display of human qualities. " I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were."

- Arthur Miller " Tragedy and the Common Man"

In his first argument, Miller states that the tragic hero does not need to be royal or noble, for the common man can fit the role as aptly. Miller explains that this is now obvious through the concepts such as the Oedipus complex, which were originally " enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar situations". He believes that if tragedy were to only apply to kings, then it would be impossible for everyone else to cherish and comprehend it.

The most crucial characteristic of a tragic hero according to Arthur Miller is that of the character possessing a sense of personal dignity. This is his notion of having a tragic hero not from high stature or rank. He is modifying the characteristics of tragic hero from the ones in Ancients and Elizabethans. " I think the tragic feeling is invoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing -- his sense of personal dignity."

- Arthur Miller, " Tragedy and the Common Man"

Arthur Miller believes that if tragedy were to only apply to kings, then it would be impossible for everyone else to comprehend with it. The only quality needed for a character to be a tragic hero, according to Miller, is the readiness to " lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his sense of personal dignity" This concept of the average man being a tragic hero is evident in *The Crucible*, through John Proctor, a local farmer.

The play is about witchcraft practices in a small town, and towards the end John Proctor gets trapped in the wrong accusation that he forced his maid to sign the devil's book. In the end of *The Crucible*, Proctor is supposed to sign a confession which will be put on Church notice board, but he refuses that because he doesn't want to be in that position because it is not true; that is how Proctor's sense of personal dignity is conveyed when he tears his confession in order to preserve his good name, even at the cost of his life.

According to Miller there is not anything like tragic flaw in particular, it is but " his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of the rightful status."

Meaning the tragic fall is occurred because, it comes to gaining his rightful social status. The common man, like in All my Sons, Joe Keller is lying to himself and to the society about his involvement in the faulty plane parts so that he can his rightful position of being a businessman back in the society.

He elaborates on this point by saying, " The quality in such plays that does shake us, however derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear."

Though the tragic hero commonly receives punishment for his or her way of being, Miller finds the connection between tragedy and pessimism to be a misconception. According to Miller, tragedy promotes " a condition of life, a condition which the humanpersonalityis able to flower and realize itself," and therefore does not correctly associate with pessimism. Because according to Miller Tragedies do not promote pessimism but it strengths the viewpoints of the spectator towards the human. " There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism.

Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal."

- Arthur Miller, " Tragedy and the Common Man"

Miller has written plays which have a social context to it, because he was influenced by Henrik Ibsen. In *All My Sons* he uses the similar style of bringing the past into present, the action taken in the past become the consequences of the present. The action of not facing the lawsuit and ship the engines resulting something grave in the present.

Likewise, incepting the idea of success with well-liked also results into a present failure. But these consequences which end in a tragedy is not pessimistic because it corrects the general audience to some extent. G. B Shaw's plays although not tragedy did show the audience the contemporary scenario of his time reflecting the society. Likewise Arthur Miller shows the audience the present scene of society, blindly believing in American dream, and sense of personal dignity are some factors of it.

Keeping in mind the two famous plays by Miller *All My Sons* [1947] *Death of a Salesman* [1949]; we will see how Arthur Miller has portrayed his tragic hero as an average man.

Analysis on Death of a Salesman

In *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman is trying to achieve American dream blindly without believing in hard work and associating the success with being well liked, to some extent that is his flaw or Hamartia. I am using this term just to make the concept more straight forward, as we learnt that Miller doesn't believe in tragic flaw. However trying to achieve the illusion of America Dream is what Willy Loman wants because that is what he wants his social image to be, to be a well-liked businessman. He fails to do so because of his misinterpreting the dream into being well-liked.

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Even though this play does follow most of Aristotle's tragic conventions which are the unity of time, place and action; no bloodshed on the stage; instead of chorus use of music, action beginning from the middle; it fails to justify Willy as the classical tragic hero because even towards the end he doesn't realize that this was the flaw [the will to attain the dream]. It was just a misconception. He does not realize that and commits suicide so that his son Biff gets Willy's insurance money. And the social status varies in ancient and modern tragedies. Willy Loman can therefore be called a Modern Hero not the classic. Language and Style:-

In Death of a Salesman because it is a box play with the possibility of props it didn't have chorus to constantly comment on the play but the play uses the help of music and lights to highlight the past and present phase so that the audience doesn't get lost. The play also starts from the middle and we are made aware of the story with the use of past and present, due to the technological revolution since the Greek times, the play has a lot of symbolism using the stage props hence it is very much the visual connection which the audience can make rather than depending on simile and metaphors.

For example in Death of a Salesman at the end of Act I, a magnificent contrast has been given in the speech and the light adjustment where Willy is talking about the greatness of Biff in football when he was young and Biff is standing in the darkened kitchen corner.

Analysis on " All my Sons"

In Miller's other play All My Sons the tragic hero is Joe Keller, his downfall is caused because of his narrow point of view which is always about being rich

and about his family, and to live up to the fact that he is living an American dream. All My Sons shows us images of the American dream and it really happens as Joe belongs to the lower class of society, rises up and achieves all the luxuries for him and his family. But his narrow minded thought process leads him to ship damaged aircraft engine cylinder heads so that he does not run out of business.

Besides shipping off the parts, he does not accept the responsibility in the courtroom, making the excuse that he was ill the day it was shipped off and the blame goes to his partner Steve Deever. Well this can be connected to the scenario of Miller's age when after the World War II during Nuremberg trials, the Nazi who were accused of certain charges were executed. Some of them committed suicides, other people did go through the trials and face the execution. Because of Keller's decision of shipping faulty aircraft parts his son Larry Keller feels absolutely disgusted with him and we know of that at the very end of the play, and that is where the reversal of action comes.

Because till now Larry Keller is not shown to the audience and Joe doesn't know about his death, he is trying to escape the reality and go back to the normal life. But in the end when he hears the letter out from his other son Chris Keller, Joe is completely shattered and takes the blame on himself and kills himself. The letter was written to Ann Deever, who was supposed to marry Larry. Larry in this letter states that he is extremely disgusted by his father's deed, and because of his father he can not face anyone, and he is going on a mission from which he is never going to come back. We come to a conclusion that Larry committed suicide, because he could not face what his father did to the military for his own benefit.

Language and Style

This particular play does not take us back and forth in past and present like death of a Salesman does, but it reveals the events occurred in the past through conversation, like Henrik Ibsen does, in A Doll's House which is the story of Nora and Torvald Helmer. The language in this play is very straightforward making it sound natural. And the action takes place in a backyard of a house, which is symbol in itself. The play is about the ugly truth that lies behind the American dream. A backyard can be significant in one of two ways.

One, it could imply the " backdoor" idea, which is selfish and ethically wrong ideas. It could also mean backyard being one of the center of American families and a happy place, but where all the ugly truths come out and where the perfectly happy, normal living the American Dream family crumbles and experiences downfall. This play is about the betrayal, about American families, about guilt, about denial, about money, about needs, about egotism, about father and son relationship.

According to the Ancients and the Elizabethan playwrights, the protagonist is always of a high position or stature i. e. king, prince or an important person from the army, Miller excluded this notion from his plays by making the average man the protagonist. We will call this average man the common man- someone who is like us, who has a regular life and whose tragic fall is not going to affect the whole nation.

Arthur Miller has highlighted American dream in both these plays and has also successfully made it the cause of tragedy. Both these plays have followed many tragic conventions making them tragic plays even after

changing the idea of having a tragic hero belonging to the noble family yet invoking the particular set of emotions in the audience.

What is the American Dream?

I would like to highlight the major idea in Miller's plays, the action of these two plays are based on the American Dream. The well-known definition of American dream is ' The traditional social ideals of the United States, such as equality, democracy, and material prosperity.' But this idea is deeply rooted in the American history. " We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed;" - Thomas Jefferson, United States Declaration of Independence [1776]

" The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." - James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America [1931]

In The Epic of America James Truslow Adams Coined this term called ' American Dream'. He says that the American Dream is not about the motor

cars and high wages, the dream is about the social order, that everyone can achieve the maximum of what they are capable of, and people will recognize them for it. It does not matter how fortunate they were when they were born. Well but these definition has resulted in having a dream of materialistic values. Even widely pictures depicting American dream shows the luxurious objects in it like a car, a big house, two children and a dog and so on. Well the pictures only show white families in it, so American dream is also misinterpreted as having a white family with all the luxurious amenities. So there has been an idea of how American dream looks like, but even California Gold rush in 1849 has contributed to the modern definition.

" The old American Dream ... was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin's " Poor Richard"... of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year by year. The new dream was the dream of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck. This golden dream ... became a prominent part of the American psyche only after Sutter's Mill." -W. H Brands

Most people know about the Sutter's Mill, as it was one of the foremost mills to dig out gold. Sutter's Mill was a sawmill owned by 19th-century pioneer John Sutter in partnership with James W. Marshall. It was located in Coloma, California, at the bank of the South Fork American River. Sutter's Mill is most famous for its association with the California Gold Rush. On January 24, 1848, Marshall found several flakes of gold that began the transformation of California from a sleepy outpost to a bustling center of activity. Sutter tried to keep the discovery secret, but eventually the word got out. During the next seven years, approximately 300, 000 people came to California (half by

land and half by sea) to seek their fortunes mining for gold or selling supplies like picks and shovels to the gold prospectors.

The idea can be applied to Willy Loman's older brother Ben from Death of a Salesman. As he goes to the forest of Africa and finds diamonds there, because of his hard work and he was lucky. Looking at these definitions now we might have an idea of images associated to the American dream, these ideas were converted to the will of possessing good wealth and good family. But this American dream fell flat on its face during the Great Depression.

Because after the economic fall people started to disbelieve in the American Dream of ' anyone' can reach the top. And this was when Arthur Miller had hardships in his life. Hence he tries to criticize this illusionary concept of the American dream in Death of a Salesman as well as in All My Sons. This dream was largely held by common men, because the images of this dream showed him there, hence every average man wanted to attain this dream that is what was performed in Miller's play Death of a Salesman. And Joe Keller achieves it in All my sons.

Conclusion

Raymond Williams in his Modern Tragedy had come up with a concept of tragedy and social disorder. In this he talks about revolution, revolution which is in general violent but it is to reshape the conditions, and it is honored and justified; but only successful revolution becomes epic. When the revolution is in progress it is chaotic and tragic. Hence it is not an epic in time of its progress but it is tragic. If we apply this theory of revolution in the society and the tragic effects to it, we can make sense out of Arthur Miller's

both the characters i. e. Willy Loman and Joe Keller, as these characters are present in the time of capitalism, depending on the new world's economy.

Now I being from the post-modern world can see this revolution of economic change as an epic; but keeping in mind the Arthur Miller's timeline and the characters based on the same timeline, it is tragic. Seeing revolution as the powerhouse of chaos they are tragic heroes, but seeing the change as an epic they are revolutionary heroes. But this idea of seeing them as revolutionary heroes can only happen now, because we see from a different age. Maybe Miller chooses the tragic hero as a common man because the time when he wrote the concept of royal people and their tragedy was out of fashion.

Because Arthur Miller was an American playwright and because America has functioned in a democratic way, so there is not only one person at the highest and there is no monarchy. And the people of New England had started thinking rationally, even the literature of that era had begun to talk about psychoanalysis and sociology and the audience had become more literate because of the printing press and the daily newspaper service, and also because of the explosion of novel writers and readers. People started to have a voice of their own and a thought process of their own because America was a democratic country, they might have not wanted the tragic hero of a high stature but a tragic hero that they could connect to.

The age had seen the sudden economic twist, like a tragic story, one day you know that there is The Great Gatsby like scenario with the economic boom and the parties and richness and happiness and the very next day you know people jumping off the building due to stock market crash. Maybe this could

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have made Arthur Miller to write about the current tragic hero which is common man. Ultimately his experiment did achieve the success, as the audience did appreciate seeing common man as the tragic hero.