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Tragic Aspects in Arthur Miller's Plays

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Abstract

In this research paper an attempt has been made to show 'Tragic aspects in Arthur Miller's plays'. Tragedy has always been a prominent genre in drama around the world. In fact, to the ancient Greeks, tragedy is a genre so significant that it is associated with religious practices and the religious concept of purification. Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is considered one of the foremost American playwrights of the twentieth century who wrote a remarkable series of highly regarded pieces that reveal profound insight, humanism and empathy that are the hallmarks of his great dramatic works. Miller has his own concept of tragedy as a modern playwright. He believes that tragedy may depict ordinary people in domestic surroundings instead of talking about a character from a high rank, a king or queen. Miller's main concern lies in dramatizing the whole man as he is part of a family and as he is part of a society. This research thus aims to explore the development of the tragic hero between Aristotle and Miller.

Keywords: Tragedy, Genre, Humanism, Society, Modernism, Hamartia

According to Aristotle the tragic flaw (hamartia) is brought about not by vice and depravity on the part of the tragic hero but by some error which results in some catastrophic action. But in modern social drama, more so in Miller's case however, the tragic flaw often exists more strongly in the milieu or in society than in the hero, who becomes the victim of external circumstances. In his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" Miller views the human situation as the product of forces beyond the control of the individual, and the tragedy inherent in the situation as a consequence of the individual's total war against a system that degrades. So then, "the function of tragedy is to reveal the truth concerning our society which frustrates and denies man his right to personal dignity, and the enlightenment of tragedy is the discovery of the moral law that supports this right."¹

In the twentieth century marked by intellectual and emotional conflicts, tragedy naturally remained very close to the Aristotelian theory of the primacy of action. The philosopher, Hegel ,

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applying his dialectic method to the drama, found the most suitable description of its moving force in the term 'tragic conflict', where the action is driven forward by the unstable equilibrium between man's will and his environment. The definition of tragedy found currency in playwrights like Arthur Miller, who, being influenced by Marxism, emphasized economic and class struggle as tragic factor. The most important point that Miller tries to make us understand about the concept of tragedy is that it deals ultimately with paradox. On the one hand, tragedy is based on presumption that the hero has to be destroyed; its line of action must be, in fact, one in which the doom grows stronger and stronger. On the other hand, his struggle against his fate should not be regarded as a waste. The essential paradox of tragedy of tragedy, then, lies in the fact that even though the tragic hero is destroyed, his struggle "demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity." Moreover, "for the tragic conflict to remain in clear focus the hero must have a definite commitment to a set of values and that this commitment must constitute the basic of hero's catastrophe." 2

If a drama, however, fails to engage its relevancy for the race, it will not attain the heights of tragedy. Miller explains further, a great drama is a great jurisprudence. Balance is all. It will evade us until we can once again see man as whole, until sensitivity and power, justice and necessity are utterly face to face, until authority's justifications and rebellion's too are tracked even to those heights where the breath fails, where – because the largest point of view as well as the smaller has spoken – truly the rest is silence.3

Modern industrialism has atomized the population into multitude of uniform human particles, so that the large scale universal representative hero has been replaced by the tiny, individual hero, who does not embody mankind, but is only a part reflecting some aspects of it. And so, Miller regards the common man as apt a subject for tragedy in the highest sense as kings, princess and great heroes were in Greco-Elizabethan sense. Miller himself remarked, "It is time, I think, that we who are without kings took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man."4 Tragedy occurs when such a man fails to recognize his place in society, or when he gives it up because of false values. That is, "Miller's tragedies are about men, who are not at one with society because they have sinned against it or have refused to assume their rightful place in it." 5

Family complex is a focal point in all Miller's plays. Yet, at the same time, he always stresses values that are greater than the family unit. He attempted to turn the connections and energies of the family situation outward, to show a clash between the private loyalties of the household and the public responsibilities of living in society. He made his characters responsible for their own actions and attributed them enough courage to face the overwhelming problems to which they are subject. By restoring the stature of his characters, by striking a balance between

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personal and social responsibility, and by showing complex characters engaged in serious conflicts, caused partly by the characters themselves and partly by the society to which they belong, Arthur Miller has created the social tragedy. Miller does not deny the importance of hero's stature. According to him, "So long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life, he cannot be debarred from the heroic role."⁶

And again, "the question of rank is significant . . . only as it reflects the question of the social application of the hero's career." Stature of the protagonist is not dependent upon his rank provided that his career engages the issue ". . . the survival of the race, the relationship of man to God – the question in short whose answers define humanity and the right way to live so that the world is a home, instead of a battle ground."⁷

For the most part, Miller's heroes are driven by compulsion rather than (moved) by (responsible) choice. What makes a character tragic in the playwright's opinion is the necessary destruction that overtakes him after he has refused a point in the battle over what he is or ought to be. The effect of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is to arouse the emotions of pity and terror, and Miller's view on this significant Aristotlian concept is modern. The pity and fear, according to Miller, can best be explained by observing those who have lost conscience, and have got themselves isolated from the larger world. To quote Miller's own words:

Pity is accidental and ephemeral, the human concern with another's mishap. A child is run over by a truck, and we have compassion for the stricken mother; but when a man is fully aware – recognizes alternatives and acts ---choosing to suffer, if need be, for noble ends, he pits his will against superior forces, and in his collapse there is the terror of fallen nobility. ⁶

Discussing the lasting appeal of tragedy written in modern times, Arthur Miller, in the introduction to his *Collected Plays*, says that it is immaterial whether the protagonist falls from a great height or a small one, whether he is highly conscious or only dimly aware of what is happening, if only the intensity, the human passion to surpass his given bounds is present, he can be said to have the requisite qualification of the tragic hero. In this connection Miller's distinction between pathos and tragedy deserves mention:

The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force. Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist. But, tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we

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reverse, century after, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief – optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. 9

The explanation of this “optimism” lies in Miller’s understanding of the so called tragic flaw. Instead of viewing it a fault, it is regarded as that very strength of will that makes the protagonist refuses “to remain passive in the forces of what he conceives to be challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status” 10

In *All My Sons* we have a conflict between family and society. The very title of the play hints at the resolution of the basic dramatic conflict. Joe Keller , who has thought that there was nothing bigger than the family, comes to the realization that the pilots , who died as a result of the sale of defective P-40 engines to the air forces , were , to quote him, ‘ all my sons’. The realization leads him to commit suicide, which is a kind of admission of guilt and lifelong error. The remark holds good in relation to the plays like *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *A View from the Bridge*. Like Joe Keller, we see Willy Loman’s pathetic exit when he drives himself off to collect his life insurance money; or it may be a longing for final respect in case of Eddie Carbone when he forces karco to stab him. Joe Keller kills himself because he is tormented by a sense of guilt. Willy kills himself because he sees Biff’s love and nothing else and finds difficult to endure the burden of fatherhood. Eddie Carbone is killed by a blow from Marco. He is, therefore, destroyed by the ignorance of his own passion and his sin of betrayal. Of the three suicides, Joe Keller’s death is singular in the sense that it is escapist in intent. At this stage one is tempted to recollect T.F. Driver’s observation that “Miller has lofty things to say about *All My Sons* being an attack upon ‘unrelatedness’ and about crime ‘having certain relationship of the individual to society ‘; but when all is said and done ‘the play seems to be only a play about an aircraft parts manufacturer in war time.” 11

The play, therefore, never passes beyond its very considerable pathos to tragedy and so falsifies the paradox that lies unexamined. Joe symbolizes Everyman who is devoted to his family; who is concerned with making a living for his family than with his responsibility towards others. Its theme, therefore, is serious and profound. But , because Miller is least concerned with portraying serious and dignified actions of characters in relation to one another – the essence of a conventional tragedy; the play fails to live up to the high reputation of a tragedy. The protagonist, Joe, miserably lacks the ingredients of a tragic hero in the conventional sense of the term and so in his downfall we are neither moved to pity nor terror. The unheroic hero suffers not because of his tragic flaw but because the values that he cherishes are those of the contemporary American society, and his downfall is brought about by his personal failure in relation to the values, as also the failure of the values themselves. Only towards the end of the play, Miller seems to give Keller the tragic insight of Aristotelian proportion. But his realization

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of personal guilt and sense of responsibility towards others is not enough. He has lost his conscience, and while setting out to succeed in the typical American way, he kills his own son and ruins himself and his family. Joe Keller, thus, deserves punishment. His son Chris says, you can better I once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you are responsible to it, and unless you know that you threw away your son because that's why he died.¹²

It appears that Joe ended his life in trying to preserve an ideal image of himself. But then, the image is shattered to pieces the moment he ends his life by putting a bullet through his brain.

The basic question which remained unexamined in *All My Sons* is "How can a person keep his sense of right and wrong while grappling for a living in a business world of cut-throat competition which recognizes only the principle of the survival of the fittest?" Miller resumes the thread of the question again in *Death of a Salesman*. The theme of the play is indeed universal, I.e., destruction of a man by the "wrong dreams" of a shallow, materialistic society based on false ideals. The situation in which Willy is placed may be the predicament of any man, provided that his illusions have made him incapable of dealing effectively with the complex problems of everyday life. Like his earlier play, Miller has not allowed Willy Loman's character to rise above the common place and to attain that higher level of man's rational nature which is concerned with the serious and profound. And so, the play lacks the seriousness and magnitude of a high tragedy. Although Miller claims that Willy Loman has the moral integrity and spiritual stature of classical dimension, it does not fulfill the requirement of a classical tragedy. A morally degraded man, that Willy is, he encourages his sons Biff and Happy to follow wrong dreams. In the play, we witness a little man struggling for his survival against heavy odds symbolized by highly competitive and materialistic American society. Willy represents all those Americans caught in the mesh of the 'success myth'. As a type, he is a product of social and economic forces outside himself. But in his struggle with those forces, Willy is a suffering human being. And when Willy is necessarily destroyed by his adherence and devotion to high dreams of the worldly success, his predicament fails to evoke 'genuine sympathy'.

No doubt "he had the wrong dreams", as Biff claimed, yet we cannot set aside Charles's answer, "A salesman is got to dream, boy" and again Linda's urging, "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He is not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."¹³ And so, Willy makes himself a tragic hero – strictly according to Miller's definition – by his abundant capacity for suffering. He undergoes tragic intensity by his refusal to surrender his cherished 'dreams' – no matter how false they are – and, thus, is doomed to failure. His intense suffering and pathetic and are enough to give his

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tragic stature within the world of middle class realities. True tragic exaltation springs from a sense of pity and fear occasioned by the hero's insight. Though Willy never reaches that insight, his downfall is pathetic. For, he is a common man, like most of us; we feel pity for him and fear for ourselves ever becoming like him. His death, therefore, "is ironic as well as far more full of pathos than Joe's, because in depicting it as the result of love as well as imagining it as the final set of a man who literally is worth more dead than alive, Miller is true to the paradox that lies at the basic of the play."¹⁴

The play for its inherent weakness has been termed as a low tragedy, which is the case with plays in which high poetic substance is mixed with low tragic ingredient. Both Joe Keller and Willy Loman are characters who seek a 'good' in the wrong way, so that they lose their identity, necessary values and are carried to destruction. "In both cases the catastrophe occurs when the totality of good asserts itself, that is when the tragic hero realises but too late – that he has magnified his ideal out of proportion."¹⁵

The Crucible, Miller's next play, is a play of greater significance, since it depicts the struggle of one accused Salemite, John Proctor. So long as he lived, he did his best to maintain his personal integrity and sense of decency in the face of hostile opposition from the men at the helm of affairs. The parallels are deep in the life of every man. The trials and the executions carried with them the essence of tragedy, as they put certain individuals to the farthest test of their human capacities. Arthur Miller has given the facts of history a touch of universal tragedy.

In the play, we are concerned with the lot of John Proctor, the protagonist, and "through him we realize most clearly Miller's theme, which, as he also tells us, is 'the conflict between a man's raw deeds and his conception of himself; the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of human being, and what happens when it is handed over not merely to the state or the mores of the time but to one's friend or wife. The big difference, I think, is that *The Crucible* sought to include a higher degree of consciousness than the earlier plays."¹⁶ The deaths of innocent victims and the curse on the entire inhabitants are horrifying and pathetic, but are not tragic until the accusation suddenly falls upon the Proctor couple. First Elizabeth, and then, John Proctor are charged with playing with some mysterious evil power that is haunting Salem. And the result is that both are apprehended. In addition to saving his wife, John Proctor desperately tries to show that the proceedings of the court are unjust by providing Abigail's true character. But, the tragedy is relentless, and the two people most able to end the unmerciful torture are trapped by their utmost fair efforts. And thus the couple begins to acquire the necessary tragic stature to some extent.

The final act reveals that Proctor's tragic dimensions are not a mere delusion. Both he and his wife are made to suffer and both have reached the understanding of themselves which

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tragic suffering must bring. For, he has been unfaithful to Elizabeth, his death brings peace to her life and naturally there will soon be peace in Salem. As he dies, John Proctor raises human nobility to the level expected of a tragic hero. Although, he is apparently a good man, renowned and prosperous among his fellow Salemites, and one who falls from prosperity to adversity, he is too good to be a prototype of the classical tragic hero. Proctor does not possess a tragic flaw which brings about his downfall. He is too innocent and spotless to be held personally responsible for his downfall. He committed blunder when faced with the decision to keep his wife and lose all humanity (as respect for himself), or to die in defiance of those who declared themselves as superior to everyone and, thus, redeem all the pain and sorrow he had caused to his society, he made the choice that broke the back-bone of the power that executed him. And that is tragedy.

Foot Notes:

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6. Arthur Miller, Introduction to *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays.*, op cit, p.165
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12. Arthur Miller, *All My Sons*, op.cit, p60.
13. Arthur Miller , *Death of a Salesman*, op.cit., p.44
14. C.W. Trowbridge," Arthur Miller, Between Pathos and Tragedy", *Modern Drama* 1967, p.25.
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16. M.W.Steinberg, op.cit, p.336.

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