

## **CAUSES OF TRAGIC VISION IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAYS**

**Anisha Singh, Dr. Madhu Rani**

Asst. Prof. English Department M.A. (English) Sunderdeep Institute of Engg,  
Ghaziabad, U.P.

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

American Literature: Drama, literature intended for performance, written by Americans in the English language. American plays begins in the American colonies in the 17th century and continues to the present. Most American plays of the 18th and 19th centuries strongly reflected British influence. In fact, no New York City theater season presented more American plays than British plays until 1910. The reasons behind this phenomenon are complex, but a common language and the ready availability of British plays and British actors offer the most obvious explanation.

By the end of the 19th century American drama was moving steadily toward realism, illuminating the rough or seamy side of life and creating more believable characters. Realism remained the dominant trend of the 20th century in both comedies and tragedies. American drama achieved international recognition with the psychological realism of plays by Eugene O'Neill and their searing investigation of characters' inner lives. As the century advanced, the number of topics considered suitable for drama broadened to encompass race, gender, sexuality, and death. Realism continued to be a primary form of dramatic expression in the 20th century, even as experimentation in both the content and the production of plays became increasingly important. Such renowned American playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller reached profound new levels of psychological realism, commenting through individual characters and their situations on the state of American society in general. As the century progressed, the most powerful drama spoke to broad social issues, such as civil rights and the AIDS crisis, and the individual's position in relation to those issues. Individual perspectives in mainstream theater became far more diverse and more closely reflected the increasingly complex demographics of American society.

During World War II (1939-1945) little drama of note appeared that was neither escapist fare nor wartime propaganda. With the end of hostilities, however, two playwrights emerged who would

dominate dramatic activity for the next 15 years or so: Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Tennessee Williams, one of America's most lyrical dramatists, contributed many plays about social misfits and outsiders. In "A Streetcar Named Desire" (1947). Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"(1955), which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, similarly focused on pretense and its destructiveness and destruction in an unhappy family. Miller combined realistic characters and a social agenda while also writing modern tragedy, most notably in Death of a Salesman (1949), atale of the life and death of the ordinary working man Willy Loman.

Critics, in general, have acclaimed the appealing directness and sincerity of Arthur Miller's dramatic pattern and technique. However many American and Indian critics attempted a balance appraisal of Arthur Miller's plays. They have made a general critical evolution of the several aspects of his play. But more work needs to be done on the topic **CAUSE OF TRAGIC VISION IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAYS**. And therefore an attempt will be made in this direction:-

An attempt will be made to study the phase of Arthur Miller's dramatic themes during the Early Period. It includes **No Villain(1935)**, **The Man who Had all the Luck(1944)**, **Death of Sales Man (1949)**.

In No Villain, Miller recalls writing in the spring of 1935 rather than return to his family home. **No Villian** (in subsequent revised versions also known as **They Too arise** and **The Grass still Grows**) draws very directly on his family life.

There can be no doubt that as "**The Man Who Had All the Luck**" contains a certain amount of merit. There are some good performances and careful staging and one or two effective moments. The fact that they have not been multiplied is the new play's misfortune, for the author and director--Arthur Miller and Joseph Fields--at least have been trying to do something away from the theater's usual stencils. But in the Forrest's current tenant they have not edited out the confusion of the script nor its somewhat jumbled philosophies, nor have they kept it from running over into the ridiculous now and then. "**The Man Who Had All the Luck**" can be set down as a play which tried, but which did not come off--through luck or whatever.

The discussion of "**The Man Who Had All the Luck**" is whether success springs from fortune or work, from some design plan about which it's useless to worry, or from care. Mr. Miller takes as a central character an automobile mechanic. He wins his wife when her father, who hated him, is killed; he branches out in business when another mechanic happens along to show him how to fix a car he cannot repair. He gets a farm, he wants children and has one, he starts a mink farm and that is successful also. His friends and others all suffer disasters, and he thinks his luck presently will change,

too. That it does not, Mr. Miller concludes finally, is due to the fact that all the things which seemed to be luck were only just rewards for work and care.

The confusion of the play lies in the fact that Mr. Miller has been working on all sides of the argument, setting them forth and not going on to give proof. The man who had all the luck ends by deserving his success through the care he has taken, yet his brother, who had taken much more, fails. Luck, or good work, you get your choice. Added to the fact that the play sometimes is impossible to follow is the additional one that some of its situations are corny to the extreme. Mr. Miller has written some good dialogue in spots, but he also has not been innocent of the obvious. It also is possible the author has been reading Saroyan now and again, a few of the characters and situations being of that school, with Mr. Saroyan handling them better. Karl Swenson is the man

with the luck, and for the most part plays him very well. Until the end of the drama, when the philosophies begin whirling, he is quiet and at ease; that he finally whirls, also, probably is not his fault. Herbert Berghof has the role of a refugee mechanic and friend; he is a sort of mild Jacobowsky who introduces the philosophy of American freedom--which hasn't much bearing on the play. Dudley Sadler is the brother who has spent his life trying to be a big-league baseball pitcher, Jack Sheehan is excellent as the father, Eugenia Rawls is the bride. Mr. Fields has directed the play carefully, and such minor roles as that of Lawrence Fletcher, as a baseball scout, are nicely done. For one of the scenes Frederick Fox has designed as garage, complete with automobile. "**The Man Who Had All the Luck**" lacks either the final care or the luck to make it a good play. But it has tried, and that is something. Though **Death of a Salesman** is regarded by scholars, critics, and theatergoers as the quintessential American drama, it is also one of the most translated and performed plays in the world. **Death of a Salesman**, many critics suggest, is a critique of a capitalist society that brutalizes the unsuccessful. While the sociopolitical textures of the play are present, however, **Death of a Salesman** gains its power from additional sources.

It is the story of an aging salesman who has reached the end of his usefulness on the road. There has always been something unsubstantial about his work. But suddenly the unsubstantial aspects of it overwhelm him completely. When he was young, he looked dashing; he enjoyed the comradeship of other people--the humor, the kidding, the business.

In his early sixties he knows his business as well as he ever did. But the unsubstantial things have become decisive; the spring has gone from his step, the smile from his face and the heartiness from his

personality. He is through. The phantom of his life has caught up with him. As literally as Mr. Miller can say it, dust returns to dust. Suddenly there is nothing.

This is only a little of what Mr. Miller is saying. For he conveys this elusive tragedy in terms of simple things--the loyalty and understanding of his wife, the careless selfishness of his two sons, the sympathetic devotion of a neighbor, the coldness of his former boss' son--the bills, the car, the tinkering around the house. And most of all: the illusions by which he has lived--opportunities missed, wrong formulas for success, fatal misconceptions about his place in the scheme of things.

On one hand, Willy Loman can never be fulfilled because he is a metaphor for what can happen to an individual when he substitutes a myth, an illusion for reality. Certainly the sociopolitical views that are alluded to throughout the play form one dimension of Miller's work. On the other hand, the essence of the play does not rest on whether or not a Marxist or Universalist reading is a closer reading of Miller's intent in this play. The real significance can be noted in Miller's own words, "This play [Salesman] seems to have shown that most of the world shares something similar to the plight of the Lomans"

What happens to an individual who believes in a myth that has become the doctrine for his life, who believes that the realization of this dream/myth is to be had at any cost?

Since Salesman catalogs the events of the last twenty-four hours of Willy Loman's life, as Susan C. W. Abbotson explains, it was Miller's plan, to write a play without transitions, where the dialogue would flow from one scene to the next without any apparent breaks. Instead of using a chronological order, in which single events followed on from one another, he [Miller] wanted to create a form which displayed the past and present as if they were both occurring at the same time. In this way, he would be able to transmit to the audience exactly what was going on in the mind of his protagonist; indeed, an early title for the play was "**The Inside of His Head**".

**A Memory of Two Monday**(1955), **After the Fall**(1964) and **The Price** (1969).

In Arthur Miller's one act play, A Memory of Two Mondays, we explore an automobile parts factory during the depression era. We follow Burt as he works there and the scene is two different Mondays. He grows to love his co-workers there, and they leave a lasting impression on him. This mirrors Arthur Miller's own experience. Burt, like Arthur, is only working there to be able to save money to go to college, but while at the factory he gets another sort of education in the realm of life experience. The one-acter, based on Miller's own experiences, focuses on a group of desperate workers struggling to make a living in a Brooklyn automobile parts warehouse during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Concentrating more on character than plot, it explores the dreams of a young man yearning for a

college education in the midst of people stumbling through life in a haze of hopelessness and despondency.

"**The Price**"(1969) is one of the most engrossing and entertaining plays that Miller has ever written. It is superbly, even flamboyantly, theatrical, running without an intermission, complying with the classic unities of time, place and action, and Miller holds the interest with the skill of a born story-teller. But, of course, the story itself is over.

It is typical of Miller's approach here that nothing does, and nothing possibly could, happen in "**The Price**." The action has ended before the play starts, and we the audience have been brought here to listen to the explanations, to comprehend how these men by the choices of their youth have come to be what they are. The play takes place in the attic of a once prosperous Manhattan brownstone, soon to be pulled down in the cause of architectural progress and financial stability. The attic is piled high with good, if shabby furniture and the knick-knacks of a past age. An old radio, a console gramophone, a pile of dusty records-the junk of a lifetime is spread out, naked, as if were, in the cold table of time. A police sergeant enters and looks round the room with a mixture of affection and concern. He strokes an old harp, he tries the Victrola, and the late afternoon stillness is broken with the scratchy tones of Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean still asking the well-honed questions of yesteryear. "Now Mr. Gallagher, now Mr. Gallagher, will you tell me what that question really means, I just wanted to find out..." The cop stops the record. We, too, are beginning to want to find out, and we are all in for a lot of questions. Miller goes about his business dexterously. The cop's wife enters, and deftly, in a few minutes of dialogue, the whole play is set up. The cop is a failure-a guy who didn't finish college because he chose, yes, chose, to support his father, a casualty of the Depression. His brother, who refused to help beyond contributing five dollars a month, has gone on to become a rich and famous surgeon. The two brothers have not met for 16 years. Now the cop has asked the surgeon to come along to help dispose of their father's furniture, long mouldering in the attic. Now Miller plays a shrewd, well-judged card. We are instinctively waiting for the monster brother, but along comes Solomon, an incredibly aged, incredibly wise antiques dealer, who has come, almost out of retirement ("You must have looked up my name in a very old telephone book"), to give a price for the furniture. From then on Solomon weaves through the play, part comic relief, part dramatic contrast, always amusing, always apt. But at last the surgeon arrives. This is the nub of the play-now the questions have to be asked and answered, and Miller does not flinch from this. (A stranger who saw the play out of town sent me a postcard suggesting that it might be called "Ploys in the Attic," and there is justice in the quip.) Of course, things are not quite what

they seem. The two brothers, lunging at each other with sibling wrath, turn motives and facts upside down and inside out, as they dance a psychological quadrille for the delectation of the audience. Who was really in the wrong: the loser or the winner? It is, as I suggest, good theater. It is not, however, very serious theater. Miller's confrontation is too rigged, too pat, We are asked to believe too much, and the characters are paper-thin. Even the motivation of the story is flimsy, and will bear little surveillance. The details of the story are extraordinarily clumsy-we have to believe such things that a man might be expected to live on the interest of \$4,000 (even in 1936 this would be modest), or that a man could not work his way through college and still support his father, or that a favorite son would not know of his father's financial depositions even after his death, or that a man's brother, a famous surgeon living in the same town, could have a nervous breakdown for three years and yet he would not even hear about it. I doubt such things. I doubt also the language of these people, for Miller has them breathing the dust of the theater rather than the air of the streets. Phrases such as "What's it all about!" or "It won't be solved in a day, Esther" or "Are we both running away from the same thing" are pure fustian. At the end I felt I had been treated to an extraordinarily diverting show, which was excellent of its kind, but a kind that is itself of less than first importance.

**Includes the Later plays:**

**"The Golden years"** (1990) was a response to events in Europe in 1930s. Miller was fascinated and appalled by the political and moral paralysis that had afflicted European powers to describe the response of those who allowed themselves to be disabled, mesmerized by the sheer fact of Adolf Hitler. At a time when they could still have acted, they watched, with a kind of stunned fascination, the process of their own destruction, believing that disinterest might buy immunity and partly aware of their own responsibility for creating the man who now confronted them. So Montezuma had watched the slow approach of Cortes, the man who would destroy him, transfixed not by his power but by his sheer implacability and by the myth that attached itself to a man who seemed to be an agent of destiny, conscious of his own capability, in a society itself edging toward dissolution, no stare into the sum of this man who apparently has neither doubts nor conscience.

By **The Golden Years**, it was an attempt to create the old ethical and dramaturgic order again, to say that one could not passively sit back and watch his world being destroyed under him even, if he did share the general guilt.

"**The Last Yankee**"(1991) a major playwright, Arthur Miller, is writing in a minor key. More anecdotal than dramatic, the play, at the Manhattan Theater Club, is enhanced by the contribution of the cast, under the direction of John Tillinger. Basically the work is an overlapping slice of life about two disparate wives in contrasting but equally disastrous marriages. They are driven to the same end: a severe state of depression. Each case is in the nature of a case history, with the playwright diagnosing the illness and offering a litany of causes without fully investigating the roots of the shared problem or the marriages themselves. In each story, the husband would seem to bear much of the responsibility for his wife's depression.

In an earlier, 20-minute version of the play at the Ensemble Studio Theater, the emphasis was on the husbands, a prosperous local businessman and a carpenter living below his social class. They met in the waiting room of a state mental hospital and gradually revealed their differences (and the similarity of their wives' ailments). The expanded version, which opened last night and will be presented in a different production in London next week, runs barely more than one hour. It abbreviates the waiting room scene and reduces the dramatic buildup of the male conflict. Then it shifts to the women, who are nervously postponing the moment they will face their husbands.

When the play focuses on the self-entrapment of the characters, Mr. Miller can be tender as well as trenchant, especially so in the case of the woman played by Rose Gregorio, the dutiful wife of that businessman (Tom Aldredge). In Ms. Gregorio's performance, the character radiates poignancy. Although she has been emotionally battered by her boorish husband, her inner spirit remains untarnished. She finds a sanctuary in tap-dancing, an incongruous avocation for such a seemingly fragile person. In the play's most touching scene, she puts on her dancing costume and taps to the tune of "Swanee." As she dances, her face lights up and for a moment we receive a picture of a liveliness that has been long suppressed. The sudden interruption of the song is deflating; Ms. Gregorio is crushed, as if the only door of escape has been bolted. Except for that moment, the play is conversational, with digressions about civic problems and the depressive state of the nation, and with the author feeding the audience biographical information about his characters. Although the dialogue sometimes has naturalness, there are self-conscious passages, as when one husband describes his wife as a "winsome woman."

The play leaves a number of questions in the air. For example, both husbands would have been able to pay for a private clinic, but each has chosen the state institution, one because of pride and the other because of miserliness. There is more to each relationship than the author is revealing; certainly there

must be more of an attachment between the carpenter and his wife, the parents of seven children.

In "**Broken Glass**" (1994) tendency for writers to turn to the past late in their careers. It was true of Eugene O' Neil and Tennessee Williams, as it has proved of Edward Albee. What takes them back is unfinished business. In Miller's case he turned back to 1938 and Kristallnacht, the apocalyptic night when Jewish property was destroyed and Jews were attacked all over Germany, because he saw the condition of that time being re-created.

**Broken Glass** hailed in England as a major work of American theatre, creates a metaphor for that paralysis in the person of Sylvia Gellburg. It also explores, with compassion yet unblinking clarity, our capacity to deny that which we would rather not confront. **Broken Glass** is not "about" Kristallnacht, not what might pass as its contemporary parallels. Like Miller's other plays it is about men and women who struggle with their own contradictory impulses.

"**Broken Glass**," Arthur Miller's small, intense, deceptively prosy new drama, has set up shop. It was just a half-century ago that Mr. Miller made his Broadway debut with "**The Man Who Had All the Luck**," which closed after four performances, to begin a career that in 1949 was to include "**Death of a Salesman**," a modern classic and the work by which everything he has since written continues to be judged. In a metier where people burn out fast, he's still remarkable for the acuity and scope of his moral vision.

It's this vision, as well as the Miller voice, which remains as strong and unrelenting as a prophet's, that distinguishes "**Broken Glass**" and give it a poignance so rare these days that it's almost new-fashioned. The play is ostensibly about a failed marriage, but the failure Mr. Miller examines has less to do with conjugal relations than with one man's warped perception of the American way. Like Willy Loman in "**Death of a Salesman**," the hero of "**Broken Glass**" hasn't misread society's signals so much as he has blindly accepted them.

Though the study shall mainly deal with these dramas outlined above to find out the causes of tragedy (guilt, punishment, responsibility etc.) but all other major dramas from the pen of Miller shall also be taken in view, where necessary.

An effort shall also be made to co-relate various facts of Miller's tragic vision with the Aristotle's tragic vision in this present research study. From the time of Greek tragedy, the pattern of tragic action has been almost uniform in being centered around the awakening of the tragic protagonist to a sense of wrong-doing on his own part. In this, therefore, Miller's interest in the subject of guilt is traditional and follows the usual pattern of wrong-doing and its aftermath. The five constituents of the tragedy-

Individual, Family, Society, Church and state-are so interlocked in a grim, relentless struggle that the criss-cross of conflicting loyalties presents a most challenging test of the protagonist's moral fiber.

## REFERENCES

Martine, James J. Critical Essays on Arthur Miller. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co. 1979.

Murray, Edward. Arthur Miller: Dramatist. New York: Ungar, 1967

Arthur Miller's Collected plays With an Introduction. New York: The Viking Press; 1957.

Time Bands (An Autobiography). New York: Oxford Univ. Press; 1994.

The Ride Down Mount Morgan. New York: Oxford Univ. Press; 1995.

Essays in Literary History and Criticism. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Christopher Bigsby, "The Portable Arthur Miller", Penguin books, 1995.

An Outline History of American Drama. Rev. Ed. New York: Feedback