

## EXPLORING ILLUSION AND REALITY IN ARTHUR MILLER'S SELECTED PLAYS

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### **Abstract:**

Arthur Miller is one of the most celebrated playwrights of twentieth century America. He holds his unique identity in American literature in general and drama in particular. Miller combined realistic characters and social agenda together in his plays. He has been influenced by the democratic ideals and wishes to bring the spirit of democracy in his writings. As literature has been defined as the reflection of life, whatever that happens in life is bound to be reflected in literature. In this sense literature holds mirror to society. Hence, as time passes things automatically change in our social life. The society and its rules, the concepts of morality, what is good and what is bad, etc. depend on the rules of the society. Whatever changes occur in society get reflected in art and literature produced by the sensible and sensitive creative minds of the artists.

As a result of this, art and literature keep on changing as the society changes in the passage of time. Arthur Miller, a playwright occupies a significant place in the tradition of American drama. Miller does not believe in art for art's sake. Most of his plays can be blown to a piece of advice. Most of his plays emerge from real images. His characters find their origin in the real, contemporary world of today. They face problems, predicaments and situations, which a common man might have to confront. His plays are realistic, naturalistic, and expressionistic. With Arthur Miller, American drama acquired new dignity and importance. Realism continued to be a primary form of dramatic expression in the twentieth century, even as experimentation in both the content and the production of plays became increasingly important. All his plays are concerned with sociological or psychological issues. The Depression gave him his compassionate understanding of the insecurity of man in modern industrialized civilization, his deep-rooted belief in social responsibility, and the moral earnestness that has occasioned unsympathetic and often unjust criticism of the age of the affluent society.

**Keywords:** Illusion, reality, American drama, society, death, tragedy, etc.

## Introduction:

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) has continually addressed several distinct but related issues in both his dramatic and expository writings. At the heart of Miller's works, partly concealed and only inadequately expressed in the early plays but fully articulated in the later ones, is a concern with guilt that is directly related to his experience as a Jew who had survived the Holocaust, and as an individual who had discovered his own potential for betrayal. He got award for his first play "No Villain" (1936) which was about Jewish people. He was happy with that award because that was a period when Americans hated Jew people. In his book on Jewish lives, Arthur explains about the prejudice he encountered, when he got award for his first college play. He wrote:

*"My first friend there was a boy who sat next to me.....Our friendship continued throughout the year. I wrote a play and it was about Jewish people. It won the literary prize of the year and was produced on the campus. I ran into him again after the play was produced. He pretended not to notice me. I think that was when I knew I was a Jew."*

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The apparent clarity of the clash between the free individual and a politically malevolent system had merely served to conceal the subtlety of a problem which had become increasingly central to his work, and which he perceived as having metaphysical rather than social origins. In his early plays and in a series of essays published in the 1940s and 50s, Miller first outlined a form of tragedy applicable to modern times and contemporary characters, challenging traditional notions suggesting that only kings, queens, princes, and other members of the nobility can be suitable subjects for tragedy. Miller has very emphatically and lucidly conveyed his conviction that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy as kings were. The tragic feeling does not anchor on the social status of the protagonist. It is aroused in us when we are in the presence of a character that is ready to lay down his life to secure his personal dignity.

Miller feels that tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself. In one of his essays on tragedy he writes: *"Tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment."* The central issue of Miller's plays is 'the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society and his family'. Miller, however, does not make out society to be the sole villain. The society finds it easier for its hostility to work because of the tragic flaw or the weaknesses of the characters. An individual can maintain his own and society's stability by resisting hatred and exclusiveness, or an individual may upset social equilibrium by enforcing the exaggerated demands of an inflated ego. Though Joe Keller in *"All My Sons"* and Willy Loman in the *"Death of a Salesman"* adopt popular norms, they get estranged from themselves and their families because of their stubbornly uncompromising self-will. Miller's characters are life-like. Drawn from the contemporary American society, they verge on the border of universality. They represent their counterparts, at least in their own country by facing similar dilemmas, similar predicaments and similar options. The protagonist does not and cannot function without entering into social relationships.

Miller's plays are concerned with rebellious sons, betrayed fathers, down-trodden workers, persecuted citizens and the like. Miller tries to achieve a harmonious blend of 'I' and 'We'. Miller is one who may be compared to his nearest associate Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill fails to connect his characters with the social environment, while Miller comes out triumphant. Miller went to see Group Theatre plays in New York because these were the plays by such writers, who created the real world of that period before the audience. Miller's feeling about the work of Eugene O'Neill was quite different. To describe Miller's opinion about O'Neill and Clifford Odets, Christopher Bigsby in his Biography on Arthur Miller writes:

*"Later Miller would revise his opinion of both Odets and O'Neill, coming to recognize his own tendency, and that of his contemporaries, to judge writers by their commitment to a cause, their ability to protest at a seemingly stifling social system, rather than by their qualities as a dramatist or their ability to address more fundamental concerns. What he*

*saw in O'Neill at the time was his fossilized individualism his dirge like longing for private salvation redolent of the alcoholic twenties." (109)*

Arthur Miller successfully explores human themes that limit and control a man's response to a particular situation or problem. Since society is a construct of several different ideologies, Miller brings them together and attempts to find out the situation where they are at odds and those which invite the destruction of an individual. By describing different situations, problems and a man's response to them, he boldly criticizes any personal gain that is achieved at the cost of destroying others. The social consciousness is one of the recurrent themes in Miller's plays. His significance as a dramatist lies in the fact that he brought into the theatre, in an important way, the drama of social questions. His plays also prove that responsibility, truth, trust and faith must be central values of men. His plays present before us questions and consequences of man's smallness and his failure to belong to the human society. The idea, which Miller puts forward, is that every man owes a certain responsibility and a certain duty to the society of which he is a member. What Miller wants to impress upon our minds is that a man should subordinate his personal interest and even the interest of his family to the interest of society at large. Miller's "All My Sons" (1947), "Death of a Salesman" (1949), "The Crucible" (1953) and "A View from the Bridge" (1955) reflect this.

Arthur Miller has an affirmative philosophy, is to accept reality and to deny the illusion. But at the same time, he is also aware of the fact that some sort of illusion is also necessary to impart dignity and self-respect to human beings and make life tolerable to them. All characters in Miller's plays have their own particular illusions and his own psychological and sociological problems and the play is intended to focus on them. Raymond Williams feels that Arthur Miller in his plays acknowledged the two basic drives in man, satisfaction and death, and recognized the transience of the former and the permanence of the latter. Then life and death have become trans valued. The storm of living does not have to be raised by any personal action: it begins when one is born, and our exposure to it is absolute. Death, by contrast, is a kind of achievement, a comparative settlement and peace. Illusion and reality are the two poles between which the action of the most of the plays of Arthur Miller moves. In the twentieth century, science, industrialization, urbanization, and democratic idealism failed to restore the identity of man.

Faced with the absurdity, nothingness, and meaninglessness of modern life, Miller's characters find themselves unable to establish a creative and spontaneous relationship with the world. These characters try to live up to false self-images and perpetuate illusory conception of their selves.

### **Main Thrust:**

Of all Miller's plays "*All My Sons*" probably comes closest to classical tradition, and is the most easily described and defined. It is a tightly knit story progressing logically from one event to another. Every action and each character are acting and interacting in such a logical sequence that audience feels it as an unavoidable conclusion. The plot is basically simple. The central character Joe Keller is a successful businessman who keeps his company from bankruptcy by selling defective airplane parts to the army during the Second World War. When twenty-one pilots die because of the faulty cylinder heads, Keller is arrested. Joe has succeeded in placing the blame for this deal on his partner, who was sent to prison. Keller was exonerated by the court but is later condemned by his son, Chris, when he discovers his father's guilt. Joe tells his family that he did it for his sons. But Chris rejects Keller's justification of his crime that anything permissible to save the family. He reminds him that all the young men who died because of Joe's deliberate dishonesty were also his sons. Chris forces his father to admit his guilt and social responsibility.

In "*Death of a Salesman*" though, the Jewishness was not the essence of the play and therefore not specified, though, equally, not denied. The play relates the story of Willy Loman. He is an aging travelling salesman who, after years of devoted service losses his job because he has become an embarrassment to his company. In order to cope with his failures in life, he retreats to the past in his mind and seems to be losing touch with reality. He tries to relive the good times, but keeps coming up against things that went wrong. His family tries to help him. His depression is exacerbated by the guilt he feels from a past infidelity which has estranged him from his older son, Biff. Rather than accepting that his life has been a failure and that Biff is unsuccessful because of his false dreams, Loman decides to commit suicide in hope that the insurance money will help Biff become successful. The play ends with his family and only friend Charley, grieving by his graveside.

Miller's "*The Crucible*" is an allegorical re-telling of the McCarthy era, red scare that occurred in the United States after World War II. This play recreates the harrowing Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692. Playing upon their elder's fears and prejudices, several mischievous and sexually repressed young girls accuse innocent town people of witchcraft. At first the accused consist mostly of the less respectable members of society, but eventually the town's leading landowners are among the indicted. The action intensifies when the central character, John Proctor, must confess his adultery and denounce his mistress to save his wife from being hanged based upon charges brought by his former lover. However, because his wife lies about the adultery to save his name, the judges fail to believe his charges. Proctor is given the chance to save his own life by confessing to witchery and naming names, but he chooses to die rather than destroy the reputation of innocent people.

The play "*A View from the Bridge*" deals with the life of Eddie Carbone, a head strong longshoreman. He took the responsibility of his wife's niece, Catherine, after the death of her parents. Eddie has developed an unwitting sexual attraction towards her. When Eddie's wife's two cousins Marco and Rodolpho enter the country illegally looking for work Eddie helped them but when Catherine begins dating the younger of the cousins, Rodolpho, Eddie gets jealous. Eddie repeatedly warned Catherine that Rodolpho's love is fake and he is only after an American passport. But Catherine ignores this. In order to split them up, before they can marry Eddie breaks an unwritten rule within his community by betraying both cousins to the Immigration authorities. Eddie Carbone projects his guilt onto others and refuses to accept responsibility for his actions. The older brother Marco takes a vow to take revenge of Eddie's refusal to admit his 'Crime'. Out on bail Marco comes to Eddie, who challenges him to a fight to try and improve his blackened image. But when Eddie draws a knife Marco kills him with it. Eddie dies declaring his love for his wife.

Another important aspect with which Miller has dealt is the identity crisis. Miller's protagonists are very much concerned with their names and identity. Initially they have their own ideologies and principles but later on they are not ready to compromise with their names or identity. Joe Keller in "*All My Sons*" realizes that his son doesn't need his money and is not ready to join his

business because he thinks that his father has earned money and settled business in a wrong way. Joe understands his sin; he expiates his sins by killing himself. Willy Loman in “*Death of a Salesman*” feels guilty not only because he had failed as a salesman but also because he had failed as a father. His sense of guilt became worse when he realizes that he is the cause of the failure of his son, Biff. He also feels guilty for his extra-marital relationship with a woman in Boston and its consequences in the family and society. Willy chooses to die for the sake of his identity. In “*The Crucible*” John Proctor prefers to die instead of confessing his guilt. At the end of the play, he realizes the value of the individual’s name which constitutes his worth, respect, dignity and integrity. If he signs the paper, he can save his life. But instead of signing paper he chooses to tear the paper, which liberates him from the web of lies, guilt, deceit and hypocrisy. He restores his dignity by choosing death.

In “*A View from the Bridge*”, Eddie Carbone kills himself by shouting that he wanted his name back. His image was shattered before the whole neighbourhood, when Marco spits on his face and shouts charging him of snatching food from his children’s mouth. He repeatedly appeals Marco to apologize and when he doesn’t, Eddie tries to kill Marco with the knife. But Marco grabs his arm, stabs and kills him. Thus, when Eddie fails to get his self-respect, his ‘name’ back, he got himself killed. Thus, Miller’s all plays end with the death of protagonists. Death is a recurrent motif in his plays and may therefore be considered a recurrent theme of his plays.

Miller is obsessed with the theme of illusion as reality in man. He believes that from whatever cause, a dedication to evil and loving it as illusion, is possible in human beings who appear agreeable and normal. He continues taking Iago as an example, the evil in him represents but a perversion of his frustrated love. One must wonder: Can Abigail, in “*The Crucible*”, who does everything out of frustrated love, all the judges of the Inquisition, even Senator McCarthy be saved from themselves by Miller's three miraculous pills - wisdom, patience, and knowledge? One should also wonder: does Miller kill John Proctor at the end of “*The Crucible*” to compensate for his own ambiguous attitude toward evil, and cop out by use of the search for identity? If so, Willy Loman is then punished accordingly.

Why do Eddie Carbone in “*A View from the Bridge*”, John Proctor in “*The Crucible*”, and Willy Loman in “*Death of a Salesman*” want their name at the cost of their lives? Miller's answer to

these questions is that these people break taboos and thus prove that taboos exist or that there is a moral world, and that by breaking, they throw some sharp light upon the hidden scheme of existence. That the individual achieves this at the cost of his life, Miller claims, “is the victory... that crime is a civilizing crime.” Eddie confronts Rodolfo's brother Marco; Joe Keller confronts Ann's brother George and his son Chris. In short, the individual's failure, his inability to accomplish what the myth of success promises, is partially a result of the illusion of which the individual cannot be cured except in death. In the end, Miller does not adequately criticize the myth of success - he ends up with social melodrama.

## CONCLUSION:

Illusion as reality is a common theme of literature. Reality is the state of the world of how it really is, whereas an illusion is erroneous interpretation of reality. Illusions often derail people from their sanity, as they cause them to inadvertently live lives in accordance to false beliefs. As a result, outcomes for these people and the people around them are often atrocious. Illusion as reality forms a significant component of many works of literature. Some characters live their lives based on illusions that protect them from reality. Others are forced to face the reality of life when the illusions are no longer believable. Others came to realize it too late that their whole life has been meaningless because they never really lived at all. There is one common message through all such illusions as reality-based literature is that illusions and false dreams destroy a man's life. Illusion gives happiness but that happiness isn't permanent; whenever reality comes forward it destroys not only man's dream but also the whole life.

The theme of illusion as reality is excessively demonstrated in “*Macbeth*”, a famous play written by William Shakespeare. Arthur Miller in his plays, “*Death of a Salesman*”, “*All My Sons*”, “*A View from the Bridge*” and “*The Crucible*”, also demonstrated the same theme. In his plays, the characters that lived illusive lives ultimately ended up leaving behind a trail of ignominy, grief and death. In “*Macbeth*”, it is Macbeth and Lady Macbeth who consistently misinterpret illusion for reality as a world that accommodates their malevolent desires. In “*The Crucible*”, the entire town of Salem misinterprets reality as a world of supernatural danger. In addition to this theme being clearly evident in the mentioned plays, it is also evident in our modern-day society, and



also in the lives of the individuals who compose it. Although the consequences of misinterpreting an illusion for reality may not always be destructive, it is for certain that they will always be adverse. The American Dream is what all Americans strive to achieve. It is the illusion of prosperity and happiness. The American Dream consists of three different elements - money, sex, and power. The plays, “*Death of a Salesman*”, “*A View from the Bridge*”, “*All My Sons*” and “*The Crucible*” are about families who strive to achieve the illusion of prosperity and happiness.

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