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The American Dramatic Tradition: Idea and Technique in the Plays of Arthur Miller

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Abstract – Arthur Miller has stated that his first concern, when writing a play, is dramaturgical: "I ask of a play, first, the dramatic question… What is its ultimate force? How can that force be released? Second, the human question – What is its ultimate relevance to the survival of the race? Society is inside of man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not."1

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Miller's works are studies of the individual in relationship to his society, the common man and his never-ending battle to gain stature, however erroneous his means and however corrupt the values to which he adheres. This thematic focus can be found in Miller's *Death of A Salesman* which embodies the tragedy of the common man who has believed in and lived by the perverted values of a materialistic society. The play illustrates the corruption of the American Dream, of that facile availability of "the good life" for all. In a sense, the play shows not a tragedy in the making, but the replay of a tragedy which has already occurred. The thematic focus, then, is directed towards criticism, not of the individual who lives, or tries to live, by society's perverted values, but of a society which promoted values that ultimately destroy the individual. The social message of the play is the tragic action[2] which rises out of the plot – the arrangement of events in a particular sequence.

The atmosphere of the play is created through a combination of realistic and expressionistic devices. The setting and dialogue can be labeled realistic because many scenes reflect a "slice of life" situation where the audience seems to be watching a normal, middle-class family go through the routine of daily existence. The expressionistic element is added by the use of flashback technique, a device that is finally instrumental in bridging the distance between the past and the present within the play. Both the "slice-of-life" element of realism and the expressionistic flashbacks are essential to the play; it is the splendid dramatic fusion of the two forms, the former working to convey that which is happening presently, the latter working to bring the audience up-to-date on events that were anterior to the play, creating, thereby, a total dramatic experience.

The forward action of the play – the chronological movement taking place during a twenty-four hour period and showing the final destruction of Willy Loman – is presented in conventionally realistic fashion. These scenes, beginning with Willy's return from an unsuccessful selling trip, show Willy moving towards his destruction. The tone, created by Miller's presentation of his character, enhances audience sympathy for the protagonist. Willy's dialogue with Linda, shortly after his return, gives us insight into his problem:

Linda: *Willy, dear, Talk to them again. There's no reason why you can't work there in New York …. Why don't you go down to the place tomorrow and tell Howard you've simply got to work in New York? You're too accommodating, dear.*

Willy: *If old man Wagner was alive I'd a been in charge of New York now! That man was a prince, he was a masterful man. But that boy of his, that Howard, he don't appreciate. When I went north the first time, the Wagner Company didn't know where New England was!*

Linda: *Why don't you tell those things to Howard, dear?*

Willy: *(Encouraged) I will, I definitely will.*[3]

These lines define the projected movement of the play, pinpointing Willy's problem; he is a salesman who can no longer make it by travelling. The tone encourages identification with, and sympathy for, a man who is aging into obsolescence. Linda emerges as a character who is not only sympathetic towards Willy's feelings, but who encourages him in his delusions of grandeur.

Ironically, at the same time she both speeds him on his way toward defeat and protects him from it.

Willy's scene with Howard, the natural culmination of his promise to Linda, serves to intensify our sympathy for Willy as well as to push him further toward suicide. Frustration occurs as Howard plays a tape recording of his son's voice while Willy waits to plead for his vocational existence. Willy's reduction to a pleading, groveling piece of humanity further encourages audience sympathy for him while, at the same time, creating hostility towards Howard and the system which he symbolises.

The use to which Miller puts the realistic, chronological sequence is to show the way in which Willy's sons, Biff and Happy, have been moulded by Willy's values. Happy is, in many ways, a mirror image of Willy and this is ironic, for Willy obviously prefers Biff who functions as a combination of scapegoat-and-hope figure. Willy alternates between the realization of what Biff really is and dreams of what he wanted his son to be : "how can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week!"

Willy's statement reflects his idea of failure and success, an idea based on the Horatio Alger myth that all young men, if industrious, can make something of themselves. Upon such fragile stuff is the American dream built. Yet, Willy will not allow himself to believe that Biff is totally irredeemable, an idea which must be established early in the play because part of Willy's tragedy is based on this very inability to see Biff as he really is. The scene in which Willy convinces Biff to see Oliver not only indicates Willy's undying belief in Biff, but also, for the moment, convinces Biff that the impossible is possible. This scene, as well as the one in which Biff waits for Oliver, only to be ignored, runs parallel to Willy's confirmation with Howard. The parallel dramatization and subsequent failures on the part of both Willy and Biff assist in collapsing the Horatio Alger myth completely, exposing it to the audience as a perverted dream. By the end of the play, Biff has realized what he is.

Biff can face the truth about himself and accept it, Willy cannot. The subsequent action attends to the tragic implications of this fact. Willy must continue to dream, and Miller shows us, through Biff's acknowledgement of what he is, that Willy's final sacrifice will be in vain, a fact which can only serve to enhance our sympathy for Willy.

Although the realistic chronological development encourages sympathy for Willy while simultaneously degrading a value system which destroys its individual products, the expressionistic flashback scenes illustrate an essential aspect of the tragedy: the presentness of the past in shaping individual identity. Miller's first title for the play, *The Inside of His Head*, implied a drama which would indicate the mass of contradictions occurring inside Will's mind as well as the interplay of past and present events. Miller has said, of the protagonist,

I was convinced only that if I could make him remember enough he would kill himself, and the structure of the play was determined by what was needed to draw up his memories like a mass of tangled roots without end or beginning (p. 1019).

The flashbacks expose Willy in the process of remembering the past, and identify him increasingly in terms of that past. It is necessary for Willy to reminisce for the memories allow him to reach at least a partial understanding of his own failure. The audience should be in a position to appreciate Willy's thinking in order further to understand why Willy cannot accept Biff's failure to be what Willy wanted him to be. To appreciate this thinking, the audience must be able to grasp events anterior to the time in the play; it must be able to see that Willy's tragic decline began well before the twenty-four hour period depicted in the drama.

In each instance, the flashback is dramatically initiated by some incident in the present action which connects, directly or subconsciously, with the memory evoked. The first three flashbacks are designed to show Willy's beliefs and entrench them upon the minds of the audience. The last two prepare the audience for Biff's failure as well as show the reason why Willy cannot accept this failure. The fourth flashback runs a close parallel to the chronological situation from which it is an outgrowth. Willy has got the boys for dinner only to be told that Biff, instead of getting money from Oliver, stole his fountain pen. The actual situation gives rise to Willy's thoughts about Biff's flunking maths, the women who come to the table initiate thoughts of the woman whom Biff found in the hotel room with Willy. Actually, these two situations from the past furnish the audience with the reasons for Biff's failure. He could no longer believe in Willy after finding him with the woman, and so refused to make up the maths grade which would have enabled him to go to the University. While Willy does not make a connection between the two situations, the audience is shown the connection through the stream-of-consciousness technique used in the flashback. It is also important that the audience realize two other things from this scene, first, that Willy, however inadvertently, caused Biff's failure, and second, that Willy cannot accept this failure because to do so would mean accepting the fact that he was the cause. The flashback, ten, have both prepared the audience for Willy's destruction and given reasons for its inevitability.

Because if provides a final commentary on Willy and his particular tragedy and also indicates the inevitability of this tragedy, the Requiem is a necessary part of the overall structure. We are offered four reactions to Willy's death; each reaction gives us a further insight into the man and his motivations. Happy responds by declaring that he will carry on the dream – "He had a good dream". The values have been passed on to Happy. Linda cannot understand why Willy killed himself. She has made the last payment on the house, they would have been free and clear, "and there'll be nobody home". Biff feels Willy had all the wrong dreams. "All, all wrong". Neither Happy, Biff, nor Linda really or totally understood Will, yet all are partially right in their reactions. Charley speaks for Miller, summing up what the audience, by this time, should feel:

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. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a sunshine…Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy, it comes with the territory (p. 1054).

Using the combined techniques of realism and expressionism, Miller blames the system and not the man. In an interview, Arthur Miller said, "I don't think one can repeat old forms as such, because they express most densely a moment of time. For example, I couldn't write a play like *Death of A* Salesman any more, I couldn't really write any of my plays now. Each is different spaced two years apart, because each moment called for a different vocabulary and a different orientation of material."[4]

Fifteen years and several plays passed between the first production of *Death of A Salesman* and Miller's autobiographical confession, *After the Fall*, a play showing what happens to man after he has, as Miller puts it, lost his intellectual innocence. In this play, Miller does not attempt to make a social statement, what he does attempt is a study of human nature, working inductively from Quentin's experiences and what they indicate about his nature through universal experiences and feelings which all men share. The work challenges the basic premise of the social theatre, the idea that man is perfectible. In *After the Fall*, Miller suggests that, while immediate social evils may be cured, there is no permanent panacea for man's dilemma since the origin of all social problems lies in the inherent nature of man.[5] This is a fact which we must accept.

Because the purpose of Miller's plays is introspection rather than social commentary, the playwright shuns the realistic, "slice of life" format and places the action in the mind and memory of Quentin, the protagonist.[6] (Miller has finally used the expressionistic structure which he considered for *Death of A Salesman*). Quentin speaks indirectly to the audience through the vehicle of an unseen listener. This device encourages the audience to become more involved with Quentin. It also allows for scenes portraying Quentin as participant as well as objective commentator. All of the dialogue is a projection from his memory; the other characters exist, as it were, only in his mind. The stage setting is designed to remind the audience that time and movement within the play do not progress chronologically:

The setting consists of three levels rising to the highest at the back, crossing in a curve from one side of the stage to the other. Rising above it, and dominating the stage, is the blasted stone tower of a German concentration camp…. People appear and disappear instantaneously, as in the mind, but it is not necessary that they walk off the stage. The dialogue will make clear who is "alive" at any moment and who is in abeyance. The effect, therefore, will be the surging, fitting, instantaneousness of a mind questing over its own surfaces into its depths (pp.1-2).

The dramatic presentation of this "instantaneousness" of mind is achieved through a seeming distillation of time. Traditional stage movement in support of progress through time is avoided in the play. The characters do not leave the stage because they exist only in the protagonist's memory, and the mind never completely blocks out people whom the individual has known in the past. The various stage planes correspond to levels of thought, some of which merge during the play. This expressionistic stage setting and stream-of-consciousness dialogue allow the audience to concentrate on the inner nuances of a mind at work, the primary device used in this drama to shape the action of the play.

The overall movement of the play shows Quentin attempting to pass a verdict on himself and mankind. The action takes the form of a quest which moves inductively through Quentin's memory to his final verdict of conclusion. His thoughts of particular situations are related to more universal conditions in order to determine the inherent nature of man. Since these conditions apply to all men, the inductive method functions to involve the audience even more strongly in the action. It is no accident that Miller's protagonist is a lawyer. He analyses life as he would a case at law: "all that remained was the endless argument with oneself – this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench" (pp. 4-5). With this revelation, the movement of the play begins; Quentin, in realizing that he must make his own judgement, becomes the vehicle through which the audience will come to its conclusion.

The movement of the quest takes on a certain rhythm or motion. In Act I, it moves. On the actual level, from thoughts of his parents to Holga, his present fiancee, and the concentration camp; to Lou, a former friend, and his suicide; to Louise, his

first wife; and finally ends with Maggie, his second wife. On the structural level, the quest begins the first level of descent into despair. The one fact which all of these memories have in common, the universal element which binds them together to form a general observation in Quentin's mind, is that, in all cases individuals, inadvertently, hurt others. The dialogue between characters and the scene which take place during this act, involving, as they do, tension between individuals, create a histrionic awareness towards this particular aspect of man's nature, an awareness which forces the rhythm of the quest downward. This expressed cruelty which individuals inflict upon others is symbolized, and therefore, further intensified, by the tower of the Nazi concentration camp looming over the set. Yet, Quentin's realizations regarding the nature of mankind are not all negative, a fact which temporarily stabilizes the downward movement of the action. Through the use of memories of Falice, who feels that Quentin changes her life; of Holga, who believes in Quentin, and of Maggie who, in her innocence, trusts him, Miller implies that hope is also an inherent human quality, again using histrionic sensibility to make his point.

Even though the element of hope is retained, as it must be if Quentin is to continue his search to determine the nature of mankind, the action moves the quester through the dark night of the soul, searching for absolutes which will offer panaceas. The quest creates a rhythm that carries the action upward, through hope, downward, through the darkness of despair, and then, once again, slants upwards, leveling off at the end of the play. By having Quentin question the concept of belief in something beyond himself, Miller both illustrates the fallacy of accepting absolutes as an answer to man's predicament and creates a downward movement leading to the dark night. The fact that there are no ideologies which can be used to answer the questions plaguing man's existence plunges the movement downward, into the depths of despair. Quentin asks the questions which all men ask; he wonders why the world is so treacherous; he speculates regarding the question of guilt, whether it is personal or collective; and he puzzles over his inability to love without hurting the other person. All these questions are necessary if Miller expects the audience to agree with Quentin's final conclusion. By the end of the play, Quentin must speak for everyman.

In Act II, the quest moves upward, out of dark night, into the daylight of enlightenment:

You ever felt you saw yourself – absolutely true? I may have dreamed it, but I swear that somewhere along the line – with Maggie, I think – for one split second I saw my life; what I had done, what had been done to me; and even what I ought to do. And that vision sometimes hangs behind my head, blind now, bleached out like the moon in the morning; and if I could only let in some necessary darkness it would shine again. I think it has to do with power. May be that's why she sticks in my mind (p. 91).

In order to recapture this perspective which Quentin must recreate if he is to reach his verdict, Miller centres the movement of Act II on Quentin's memories of his life with Maggie. The action moves upward with Quentin's realization that he had once "seen his life" and can, possibly, recapture this vision. It is necessary, here, for the audience to see the difference between what Quentin thought he felt for Maggie and what, in retrospect, he realizes his true feelings were: Miller accomplishes this by having Quentin remember a scene from the past and then having him comment, objectively, on his retrospective realization regarding his feelings at the time. Thus, Quentin functions as both participant and commentator, a dramatic technique showing that identity includes the past and that the past must obtrude upon the present if the individual is better to understand his own nature. Quentin realizes that both he and Maggie wanted the same thing: "Yes, power! To transform somebody, to save!" (p. 136) and through this realization he moves closer to the end of his quest which has been attained only through seeing his own past weakness from a point in the present, a distance which allows him to rise above the limitations of immediate subjectivity.

By the end of the play, the verdict can be drawn through inductive reasoning. The verdict is that human nature is not perfectible. Man is inherently cruel, even to those he loves. What he must do is admit this fact to himself because, as Quentin's quest has shown, this fact is the only "truth" we have:

I could not love the world again! Is the knowing all? To know, and even happily, that we meet unblessed; not in some garden of wax fruit and painted trees, that lie of Eden, but after, After the Fall, after many, many deaths. Is the knowing all? And the wish to kill is never killed, but with some gift of courage one may look into its face when it appears, and with a stroke of love – as to an idiot in the house – forgive it; again and again … forever? (pp. 162-3).

For Miller, the knowing is all. The structure of the play, that action which brings Quentin to his final realization about human nature, has exhibited, to the audience, Miller's views on the human condition. These views unfold gradually, tracing its movement, identifying through histrionic sensibility, and coming to a logical conclusion through inductive reasoning.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Quoted in *American Playwrights on Drama*, ed. Horst Frenz (New York, 1965), pp. 141-144.

2. In *The Idea of a Theater* (New York, 1949), p. 48, Francis Fergusson states; "By action I do not mean the events of the story but the focus or aim of psychic life from which the events, in that situation, result."

3. Arthur Miller (1965). *Death of A Salesman*, in Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd (eds.), *Masters of Modern Drama* (New York, 1965), p. 1021. All further references are to this edition.

4. *Paris Review*, 1966, No. 38, p. 84.

5. C.W.E. Bigsby (1969). *Confrontation and Commitment* : *A Study of Contemporary American Drama 1959-1966* (Missouri, 1969), p. 41.

6. Arthur Miller (1965). *After the Fall* (New York), p.1. all further references are to this edition.

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