

## **Elements of Dignity and Realism in Arthur Miller's Major Plays**

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**Abstract.** Regardless to other contemporary playwrights Arthur Miller's works have been a source of attention. It is an acknowledged fact that his mindset as a creative artist is of an outstanding calibre and high artistic maturation. Yet again, the literary products of Arthur Miller are qualified by contextual relevance, structural finesse, organizational tightness, verbal brilliance, and artistic control. The plays of Arthur Miller have been subjected to real presentation of society. Following the great realistic and socialistic dramatic tradition of Ibsen and Shaw, Arthur Miller promoted such plays in the American scenario. Most of his plays are very sensitive dramatizations of contemporary problems arising out of the materialistic pursuits of man. He does not invest his characters with any heroic, romantic, or divine qualities. There are no old world charms about them. Still they carry about them all the tragic aura of a king or a prince of the classical dramas. The critics say, his plays are the depiction of real societal characters. In this article the analysis of the characters of some major plays have been reviewed and it has been traced that Arthur Miller has been a true advocate of the American modern society and his characters maintain a high order of dignity and the plays have elements of realism.

**Keywords :** Dignity; modern; realism; reflection.

American drama comprises the arena of naturalism, realism, expressionism, modern, sceptical and scientific outlook aiming at the struggle from individual to collective personality. Till the twentieth century the original American drama did not come into being. The two world wars were instrumental to witness a drastic change at individual, social, cultural, psychological and political level into the life of individual and the collective. It also caused the growth of commercialism in the country. Americans had to strive hard to fulfil their dreams in highly commercialised life as men had to stumble through life in a haze of hopelessness and disdainful lives.

The changing value of American middle class family in the personal and political arena had every reason to put a question mark on existence of civilization. Hence, the struggle and frustration of modern man are the stock-in-trade of modern tragedy and its distinctive dramatic language reflects the Greek tragedy of great power. Twentieth-century Americans needed drama as forceful and practical as themselves and connected with the common sense of people. For American playwrights theatre was a serious business and their primary purpose was to make man more human and less alone. It is this ability to specify drama, that gave such

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maturity to the American theatre by the writers of the century. Arthur Miller played a crucial role in this making of the new American drama, because his works took root on native ground. Handling issues rather than ideas he dramatized in play after play the social implications of our own individual actions.

In the 'Introduction' to his *Collected Plays*, Miller freely admitted that his dramas were involved with contemporary ideas, but at the same time, the playwright suggested that he regarded the theatre as something more valuable than a place to air current events. Miller said:

These plays, in one sense, are my response to what was "in the air", they are one man's way of saying to his fellow men, "This is what you see every day or think or feel;...My concept of the audience is of public, each member of which is carrying about with him what he thinks is an anxiety, or a hope, or a preoccupation which is his alone and isolates him from mankind; and in this respect at least the function of a play is to reveal him to himself so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them. (*Collected Plays*, 11)

Apart from getting failure in some plays, Miller's dramas, beginning with *All My Sons* and ending with *Incident at Vichy*, have inspired a variety of responses from the American public interest on theatre, who, sometimes, praise his efforts and, other times, condemn them. Miller's metal of power was showcased through his two early plays, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*; nevertheless, his *A View from the Bridge* and *After the Fall* establish an eminent and honourable part of the playwright's contribution to the theatre. Miller's rejection of his early dramatic formula was based on the supposition that wonder simply did not make sense to common sense people. In the 'Introduction' to his *Collected Plays*, the dramatist wrote:

But wonder had betrayed me and the only other course I had was the one I took—to seek cause and effect, hard actions, facts, the geometry of relationships, and to hold back any tendency to express an idea in itself unless it was literally forced out of a character's mouth. (*Tragedy and the Common Man*, 3)

To study an analysis of Miller's contribution is not a complex task, as his creation brings sensation of public interest and moreover of day to day life affairs. Joe Keller, the central figure of *All My Sons*, once sold, at a profit, defective war materials to the American Army, and these faulty parts were the eventual causes of accidents that destroyed the lives of twenty-one pilots; after viewing this drama, several critics felt that Miller was attacking the wartime activities and

Elements of Dignity and Realism in Arthur Miller's Major Plays malpractices of capitalists, and therefore, the play reached its zenith not because of its texts but because of its sensational and disputed matter. *Death of a Salesman* did not fare much better than *All My Sons*, for, again, some reviewers were fascinated with the economics of the play, or they speculated about Willy Loman's possibilities as a modern tragic figure. More interestingly, audiences became involved in speculations about the similarity between Maggie, a character in *After the Fall*, and Marilyn Monroe, Miller's former wife, who committed suicide. Of course, *Incident at Vichy*, with its revival of German atrocities, also deeply disturbed many audiences who were offended because Miller brought up an unwanted part of man's past. Thus, the theatre in public has been generally found that plays usually contain some controversial element that lends itself to speculation.

Miller affirms in an introduction to his collected plays that he often chooses confronted and sensational topics as the subject matter of his dramas, but, nowhere, does the playwright state that he is interested only in the sensation. Unfortunately, in too many instances critics and audiences have dwelled exclusively on the striking aspects of Miller's works, and this concentration has neglected, if not damaged, other facets of the plays. Of course, it has been a misfortune that *The Crucible* and *After the Fall* were written so as to parallel current happenings, for this proximity naturally lent itself to exploitation; and quite understandably, it was not difficult for people to see the relationship of World War II and the plays, *All My Sons* and *Incident at Vichy*. However, had *The Crucible* been produced many years after the advent of Mc Carthyism, the public's original reactions to it might have been different. A little time and distance might also have altered the opinions of *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*, and, perhaps, greater justice would have been meted out to the playwright and his plays had his works been examined within a perspective that excluded sensational relationships. If Miller's dramas are examined within a perspective that excludes the sensational, the underlying essence of his canon appears to be the portrayal of man in search of dignity. Attempting to justify Willy Loman as a tragic figure, Miller once wrote:

From *Orestes* to *Hamlet*, *Medea* to *Macbeth*, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society. Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation. (15)

Although this statement is part of Miller's defence of Willy Loman, its application cannot be confined to *Death of a Salesman*, for every major figure in Miller's works is involved in a struggle for dignity. In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller seeks to dignify himself by claiming that he committed crime for the sake of the

family business; in *The Crucible*, John Proctor regains dignity by refusing to co-operate with the witch hunters; throughout *A View From the Bridge*, Eddie Carbone struggles for a position in his household, and his efforts to protect his name reflect a concern for dignity; Quentin, the central figure of *After the Fall*, finds life and marriage a maze of indignities, but he decides to remarry and get profit from his mistakes; and in *Incident at Vichy*, Prince Von Berg's personal sacrifice is made after a realization about the nature of dignity. Thus, Miller's dramas, revolve around people who are in search of dignity. This search for dignity in Miller's dramas is primarily of a two-fold nature, and neither part operates independently of the other. On the one hand, the search for dignity is a man's attempt to gain or maintain what might be called a respected position in society; and all too often the search is hampered from within the character himself or by some external force. On the other hand, the search for dignity involves the dignity or lack of it, that exists in the relationships among man; of course, this is essentially concerned with how men respect the rights of other men.

In all of Miller's dramas, his characters and their search for dignity are embroiled in a conflict that contains either, or both of these aspects of dignity, and quite often they die in quest of their rightful position. Unfortunately, as is true of Willy Loman and Eddie Carbone, not all of Miller's characters are pursuing dignity within a proper perspective, and so part of the search for dignity is established through a dramatization that points out the negative approaches that some men take in seeking their goals. However, from first to last, the plays of Miller examine the lives of individuals who try to establish their rightful place or the rightful place of others in society. In struggling for dignity, the task of national interest is not depicted and is faced through the characters of Miller, rather they directly meet the circumstances that they meet into their lives. Neither reigns are at stake in the plays of Miller, nor the character's choice changes the course of history. However, the fact that no kingdoms are at stake in no way detracts from the struggle for dignity, but it does reflect the composition of the modern world, for, today, no man can determine the destiny of a nation. Obviously then, the men and women in Miller's plays are contemporary creatures who are forced to cope with a contemporary society and world, but, in essence, their struggle for dignity is a conflict as old as antiquity, and though they be something less than Hamlet, they are still human beings in search of what the Prince of Denmark died for. What makes the search for dignity most difficult for contemporary man is that there are really relatively few ways that he can atone for indignity, and thus regain dignity. This situation is clearly portrayed in Miller's works, for by far, it seems that most of Miller's characters resolve their difficulties by death. Perhaps the absence of absolution is part of the Puritan heritage that the citizens of Massachusetts bequeathed to America, but wherever it came from it is an unpleasant alternative. Medieval man had recourse in the confession and penance, but modern man, moving away from such devices, has found it somewhat impossible to substitute an appropriate panacea.

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However, it must be noted that the Miller seems to undergo a softening of the harsh means of atonement, for by his last plays, the dramatist offers life, not death to those who have violated dignity. Miller is quite aware of contemporary man's problems, and the dramatist, to a certain extent, constructs his plays in such a manner that they will give man a better understanding of himself and others. Writing about his plays, Miller observed :

Each of these plays, in varying degrees, was begun in the belief that it was unveiling a truth already known but unrecognised as such. My concept of the audience is of a public, each member of which is carrying about with him what he thinks is an anxiety, or hope, or a preoccupation which is his alone and isolates him from mankind; and in this respect at least the function of a play is to reveal him to himself so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them.

(*Collected Plays*, 15)

Moreover, Miller uses and views the theatre as a place where truths are revealed, and brings out the facts in front of an individual man; by seeing these truths, understands better himself and his fellowman. Gilliard says :

The nature of dignity is often probed in Miller's plays , his dramas are not monotonous repetitions of each other. Rather, his works are continually experimental in form and technique, and each composition examines yet another aspect of the search for dignity. Also, if *After the Fall* is excluded, Miller's canon begins with a complex style and ends with a simple style. Hence Miller has avoided the needless repetition in his plays and has developed a new style of simplicity. (Gilliard, 6)

A host of reviewers, including Eleanor Clark, Richard Watts Jr., Richard J. Foster and many others, have offered their opinions about the economics and the tragic implications in Miller's plays, but not one of them has actually developed a study that completely analyses Miller's concern for dignity. Many noted critics have also neglected this aspect of Miller's dramas. Dennis Welland's study, *Arthur Miller*, now somewhat outdated because of additions to the dramatist's canon, concentrates on the technical development rather than the dramatic phase of Miller's works. John Gassner and Joseph Wood Krutch have also studied Miller's plays, but they are primarily concerned with concepts of modern tragedy and the social implications in the playwright's compositions. Sociologists and psychologists have added new dimensions to the study of Miller's works, but, in one way or another, these men also neglect the importance of dignity.

Therefore, it may be thought that the critics have not fixed attention to Miller's point of dignity and his preoccupation with his characters. Undoubtedly, there are many reasons why scholars have not studied the importance of dignity in Miller's plays. Perhaps, the very smallness of Miller's canon has caused some scholars to overlook his works, and, more than likely, until Miller finishes writing, much study of his drama will not be done. However, although no major work has been done on this topic and although it may be some time before scholars will completely turn to Miller's canon, it must be realised that the search for dignity plays a significant role in this American playwright's compositions for the stage. Of course, it is not the greatest arena of his drama, but, in many ways it is a prelude to a better understanding of the other aspects of Miller's dramatic efforts.

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