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The Reflection of Self-realization in the Major Dramatic Works of Arthur Miller in the Light of Aristotelian Definition of Anagnorisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine three of Arthur Miller's plays to observe how he has handled the aspect of self-realization and how he has actually expanded the concept to include a greater social awareness on the part of his central characters. Self-realization is a dramaturgical term that has been derived from anagnorisis, which Aristotle used in his Poetics to describe one of the Characteristics of Greek tragedies. In modern usage anagnorisis has become more or less synonymous with self-realization, but in its earlier restricted sense as used by Aristotle, it meant simply disclosure, discovery, or recognition. In Arthur Miller's canon, truth, guilt, and complicity are virtues when they are comprehended, and recognition of them is often part of character's process of self-realization. Self-realization is an exemplary process in which Miller's audiences are didactically instructed about the dangers of

certain private sins as well as their social obligation. Dramaturgically, the term self-realization in Miller's work has been enlarged to include not only an awareness of personal flaws and foibles but also man's obligation to society.

Keywords

Self-Realization; Tragedy; Social Evils; Identity Crisis.

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Aristotle defines anagnorisis or discovery under his definition of simple and complex fables or plots. A simple plot is one in which the hero experiences a change in fortune without peripety or discovery. Peripety is defined as a reversal or a change "from one state of things within a play to its opposite (Barnwell162)". Aristotle defines discovery as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personage marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of discovery is one attended by peripeties, like that which goes with the discovery in Oedipus (Miller 96). A complex fable is one in which discovery leads to peripety although the complex plot may involve either discovery or peripety or both. When both occur together and result in a climax or turning point, the result of their combination constitutes "the most effective kind of tragedy". One could argue that a tragedy which does not involve discovery is not as effective as the tragedy which does. However, Aristotle does insist that realization of a tragic hero's hamartia is mandatory. If the tragic hero experiences some degree of discovery in a complex tragedy, the tragic effect is evidently heightened. In spite of the self-realization of his flaw, the hero usually cannot change his course because of circumstances already set in motion.

Self-realization on a hero's part involves recognition of his flaw and enlightenment on his part as he moves from ignorance and innocence to knowledge, guilt, and a greater consciousness. As he comes to awareness, he may perceive his true nature or comprehend his plight and the factors that have brought him to his current state. One modern definition of anagnorisis is

“the tragic hero’s recognition of himself and the essence of life (Barnet 656)”. For example, some of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes such as Romeo, Antony, Othello, Macbeth, and King Lear grow in self-understanding as they move from ignorance to knowledge and comprehend the factors in their personalities which have led them toward their downfalls.

In modern drama, the hero’s search for self-awareness is not always so easily comprehended. Arthur Ganz holds that a character’s search for recognition and self-identity is the centrality of all Miller’s dramas:

All of Miller’s central characters are engaged in this essentially personal quest for his own self. When he has found that self-and a Miller hero almost inevitably does so-he has, in the mind of his author, reached the point at the end of his journey. (Gans 231)

There seems to be a growing need in modern tragedy for some character other than the hero to interpret the hero’s tragic fall and to clarify the hero’s search for self-realization. According to William P. Fleming, Jr. in an unpublished doctoral dissertation finds that in analyzing American drama, there is this need for recognition and self-realization by some other person in the play other than the central figure because modern audience tend to misunderstand current tragedy (Williams Jr.). Miller has used this additional device of another character in two of tragedies, in the Requiem of *Death of a Salesman* and in the role of Alfieri, a combination of Greek chorus, raconteur, and lawyer-confidence, in *A View from the Bridge*. Miller admits that he wanted Biff Loman’s greater self-realization to be a counterbalancing factor for Willy’s relative lack of it. The hero in modern tragedy who goes to his death without awareness of his condition and of the factors which have brought him to his plight is generally regarded as a dupe, a tool, or an idiot. The greatest controversy surrounding the character of Willy Loman is whether he is a

suitable hero of sufficient stature for a tragedy and whether he has the mental capacity to come to self-awareness.

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* explores the themes of greed, wartime profiteering, and man's relationship and obligation to society above and beyond the concerns of his own family circle. Miller is concerned with one of his recurring themes: true self-realization of a character encompasses both an awareness of one's individual guilt as well as an awareness of one's broader social guilt. Of all Miller's major heroes, only two fail to achieve this bipartite realization. Even though he willfully defies the social code of his community, Eddie Carbone fails to acknowledge his incestuous feeling for his niece and his possible latent homosexuality. Willy Loman achieves a limited amount of self-awareness but is unaware of the social consequence of any of his acts. Willy Loman and Joe Keller are alike in that each can see no further than needs of his individual family although Joe is to learn that his responsibility extends to society.

Chris Keller's view of his father has been idealistic. He has never regarded his father as human but as an idol. Chris is faced with the realization that he has made of his father a kind of infallible god. What Joe has done cannot be condoned, and Chris is forced to admit that his belief in his father's innocence was hollow.

There is some rationalization on Chris' part as he distinguishes between having suspected his father and actually knowing of his guilt. Chris' strong sense of moral superiority falters as he succumbs to the pragmatism of his parents: "I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical. You made me practical (*All My Sons*)".

Dennis Welland is of the view that producing of Larry's letter is an example of "meretricious playmanship" although he believes Ann's reluctance to produce it is a partial saving grace as well as a dramatic expediency.⁶ If the long concealed letter is playwright's "gimmick", it is nevertheless an effective

device because of the results it produces. Kate's illusion about Larry is destroyed. Chris, having decided that he is now practical, would probably have never insisted that Joe go to prison if Larry had not seconded Chris' concept of the gravity of Joe's crime. Joe is not yet really contrite, believing that if he professes a desire to be punished, Chris will not demand retribution. Chris' moral stance has not convinced Keller of his social wrong. Only when he is overwhelmed by Larry's letter and learns that he has directly caused his own son's destruction, does Joe come to social awareness. After Joe reads Larry's letter, Chris leaves the decision of any punishment up to his father: "Now you tell me what you must do...tell me where you belong (*All My Sons*)".

The firing of a gun from inside the house serves as final punctuation to Chris's speech. Having become aware that there is something bigger than his family, Joe has carried out his threat to shoot himself. Close to tears, Chris returns from his father's body inside the house and goes to his mother's arms. Kate's reply is the final line of the play: "Don't dear. Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live (*All My Sons*)".

Joe commits suicide because he has discovered that the world's boundary line extends well beyond his "forty-foot lot line", that there is a larger area of moral responsibility which goes beyond one's immediate family, and that his financial greed has resulted in the deaths of twenty-one pilots and his own son Larry. He has learned that Larry's view of his crime was no different than Chris'. If his father has learned that there is a larger moral obligation to society, Chris has realized the inverse. He has helped bring about his father's death by his stiff idealism.

Death of a Salesman is Arthur Miller's masterpiece play which introduces to us a tragic hero, Willy Loman who symbolizes all common people. Various critics are of the view that the play can be studied as melodramatic pathos, a comedy-in the sense that Biff is the protagonist and reasserts his drive toward

creativity and vitality at the play's end- an epic of modern man, bourgeois tragedy, social drama, and "low" tragedy.

Brook Atkinson feels that "the classical definition of tragedy is too narrow to have much practical validity" but notes the Aristotelians still objects to *Death of a Salesman* being termed a tragedy (Atkinson). one's reaction to the play seems dependent upon the view-point of the critic at hand-whether he is liberal or conservatives, a Marxist or a capitalist, a traditionalist or a modern concerning tragic theory, whether one sees Willy as fated or flawed or a curious admixture of both, and whether one regards the play as realistic, expressionistic, or naturalistic in its dramatic mode. The play's ability to arouse supporters and detractors and to inspire an endless number of critical interpretations and insights attests to its greatness as literature. *Death of a Salesman* is a modern tragedy and Willy Loman is a tragic rather than a pathetic hero.

Willy Loman is the protagonist, for the greater part of the play is seen from his viewpoint, inside his head. All of Willy's recollections from the past are a struggle on Willy's part to use the past in an attempt to find some meaning to his present dilemma, the uncertainty over the job and over Biff's love, and to examine his values to justify his suicide, a last act of love, for he thinks it will bring Biff twenty thousand dollars and the chance for his son to start a new life. Biff is more interested in seeing the truth from his own vintage point so that he may escape from his wandering aimlessness. Willy's dilemma is more crucial because it involves his entire family. Biff finds and redeems himself by sacrificing his father's system but he does not sacrifice his father. If anything, he hopes to prevent Willy's suicide by having Willy give up his "phony" dreams. Willy ventures his greatest asset to justify his existence—his life.

Hagopain considers the conflict between Biff and Willy to be a subplot in which the son emerges as the protagonist of the play. However, the father-son conflict is the keystone of the play as well as its main plot just as the conflict

between Chris and Joe Keller is the centrality of *All My Sons*. Biff's self-realization is more obvious than Willy's limited anagnorisis because it is explicitly stated by him. But Willy is the central protagonist and he dominates all of the action of *Salesman* and achieves more self-realization most critics have acknowledged.

Those critics who regard Willy as a pathetic, rather than a tragic victim and who believe he lacks volition because of insanity would deny any possibility of self-realization on Willy's part. Aristotle observed that a tragic hero is involved in the making of his own destruction as a result of hamartia, which S.H. Butcher defines as a great error in judgment, human frailty, a moral weakness, or a character flaw (Butcher 317-19). The tragic hero may bring about his own downfall either through ignorance as in the case of *Oedipus Rex* or through deliberation as in *Medea*. Whether knowledgeable or ignorant, the hero by implication causes his own destruction. He is not involved in misfortune and eventual catastrophe as a result of deliberate vice, depravity, wickedness, or villainy that would justify the disaster but because he makes a great mistake in spite of all his good qualities. Social victims, such as Yank of Neanderthal intelligence in *The Hairy Ape* and Mr. Zero, a nonentity of sorts, in *The Adding Machine*, fail to rise to tragic grandeur because of limited native intelligence to take a stance against, even perhaps of being aware of, the social forces of a mechanistic age that moves them like pawns and indifferently destroys them. The problem of whether Willy is a pawn, a social victim of the capitalistic system, or a mad man totally oblivious to his fate, must be examined and then rejected; for if Willy is insane or is a naïve victim, the question of self-realization becomes unimportant, and he is a pathetic dupe of a system that he neither understands nor could muster any opposing force or struggle against. Struggle with the possibility of victory is a key element of most highly-regarded tragedies. It becomes a question of whether one is to regard Willy as flawed or fated. Fated would encompass determinism or destruction by

a system or society which is overwhelming and inevitable despite any effort to the contrary on the hero's part.

Three critics, Eric Bentley, Eleanor Clark, and John V. Hagopian, see Willy as a victim of the capitalistic system. Bentley feels that Miller's handling of *Salesman* has been confused by Marxism. Short-story writer, novelist, and essayist, Eleanor Clark is more blunt: "It is, of course, the capitalistic system that has done Willy in...." She believes that despite his initial appearance, Willy is not flawed, and she views the play as intellectual "confusionism" from behind which Miller hides his Marxist fellow-traveling. Hogopian, who views Willy's struggle with society as the main plot and the father-son conflict as a subplot, concurs, saying the play is an indictment of capitalism. Other critics have called the play an attack on the American way of life and have seen Willy as a tool who succumbs to the falseness of the American dream.

Willy is not the victim of the evils of a vicious, capitalistic economy, but some traits of American society may have contributed to his downfall. Willy is not a pathetic idiot or an insane man; he is a man of volition whose downfall has been brought about by him. Two critics, John Mason Brown and Gerald Weald, have made contradictory statements about the degree of Willy's self-realization. In 1950 Brown would only raise the question rhetorically as to the degree of Willy's awareness. However, a year earlier, he had been definite that Willy achieved a certain of awareness (Brown 203-4). In 1964 Weales had noted that Willy was forced to see himself clearly and learned of alternate values before he died. In 1962 Weales' stance was not certain: "His (Willy's) continuing self-delusion and his occasional self-awareness serve the same purpose; they keep him from questioning the assumptions that lie beneath his failure and his pretense of accuse (Weales 142)".

Sister M. Bettina believes that Willy achieves a mixed self-realization in an oblique fashion; he struggles against knowing "what" he is in spite of his having a strong consciousness of "who" he is. Because Ben is seen only in

scenes which contain expressionistic elements, she thinks Ben becomes a manifestation of subjective reality and a symbol of the force that lures Willy to suicide. Thus the scenes with Ben give the audience an inner view of the workings of Willy's mind, struggling against a sincere estimation of himself. She argues that Ben is as a personification and projection of Willy's personality to provide "for the audience a considerable amount of the insight which, though never quite reaching Willy, manifests itself to them in the dramatic presentation of the workings of his mind (Bettina 409-12)". William B. Dillingham finds parallels between Joe Keller's and Willy's self-realization; both tragic heroes realize too late that they have magnified their ideals out of all proportion (Dillingham).

Although less awesome in magnitude than most traditional tragic heroes, Willy is a protagonist who possesses all of the characteristics of the Aristotelian tragic hero if some definitions are stretched or adapted. He has free will and is more flawed than fated. Although he seems to be suffering from the ill effects of a Dale Carnegie crash course and other excesses of the American Dream, his doom is a result of various personal flaws. He is not passive; he does have alternatives. He could have gone to work for Charley or used his skills as a carpenter to make a living. He is involved in struggle and goes to his catastrophe because his fanaticism in pursuing the wrong dream is a kind of tragic commitment as well as a flaw. His downfall has evoked catharsis in audience.

Willy lacks the social awareness that Joe Keller discovers. Unlike Keller, who achieves social insight just before he shoots himself, Willy goes to his death concerned only with his immediate responsibility to his family. However, Willy is not as bad as a man as Keller, who has been the cause of the death of twenty-one pilots and his own son. Keller and John Proctor become aware of social responsibility that extends beyond the sphere of their own families, concerns, and private salvations, but Willy remains sensationally ignorant of

such larger responsibilities. Like Proctor, Willy is concerned with his name, his dignity, and his identity. “I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman... (*Death of a Salesman*)!” Willy refuses to be belittled by Biff or anyone else. He insists upon his dignity and upon rising above the littleness that might be consigned to. Assured that Biff loves him, Willy mistakenly believes that his last act as a father in providing Biff with twenty thousand dollars will pardon him in his son’s eyes for all of his failures. Blind to social awareness, Willy achieves a certain amount of self-awareness, and critical support and textual analysis show that he does. Throughout the play Biff experiences a growing self-awareness that is more explicitly stated than Willy’s.

Miller’s third important play, *The Crucible*, opened at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York on January 22, 1953. Generically, *The Crucible* has been labeled a melodrama, a thesis drama, an allegory, a parable, a modern morality play, and a tragedy. One of the themes of the play is man’s search for personal integrity and honor. Proctor sacrifices both his honor and his good name in a public confession but at the tragedy’s end salvages the integrity of his conscience. When other attempts fail to prove the hysterical girls have lied, Proctor desperately announces to the court that Abigail is a whore and he is a lecher. His attack on the Abigail’s morals is mollified by Elizabeth’s only lie in her life. Then he is accused of being the Devil’s man by the vacillating Mary Warren. Given the choice of confessing to a crime he never committed, John chooses the latter after he has first wavered, signed a confession, and then ripped it up, for he comprehends his confession will be used to strengthen the court’s position. John also comes to understand he has been guilty of social complicity. Proctor, the most articulate of Miller’s heroes so far, has a full realization of the forces in himself and his society that have led him to his tragic fate. His ability to view himself objectively provides a greater tragic insight that Willy consciously achieves.

The evil in *The Crucible* is for some as formidable and absolute as that in *King Lear*; only in the latter does an ordered universe of goodness finally prevail. We can assume that Proctor's choice to hang helps break the tyranny of theocracy in Salem, but within the confines of *The Crucible*, evil as personified in Danforth and Abigail is unrelieved, unpunished, and triumphant. Even though the flawed Proctor "has his goodness now", his defeat is elevating only as tragedy can elevate. The play's ending to melodrama; evil triumphs and good is destroyed.

Miller has obviously created in John Proctor his most conscious hero so far. Willy Loman represses his self-realization back into his subconscious because it is too painful to examine. Out of shame Joe Keller, when confronted with the truth that he cannot deny, without deliberation kills himself. Rather than stooping to greater shame, Proctor, after having articulately weighed and examined with full deliberation his choices, transcends his private flaws for the greater good and goes to a welcome death. Elizabeth Proctor comes to a self-awareness of her own. By the end of the play she is fully contrite and willing to take her share of the blame for her husband's adultery.

To the end, it is explored here on the basis of above mentioned in depth analysis of Arthur Miller plays that suicide is usually an inescapable last act of desperation because the truth is too painful to bear. A truth-bearer usually confronts the suicide victims with the enormity of their guilt which can only be resolved through suicide. From this confrontation the onlooker learns a moral lesson. Through the truth-bearer's resolve to tell the horrifying truth and through the implicated men's inability to excuse away truth come moral elevation and self-realization. Unable to hide or repress the truth any longer when he is forced to confront it, the victim kills himself. Most of Miller's later heroes, however, can bear the truth and survive, but as survivors, they carry an even greater guilt. For many of Miller's heroes, self-realization becomes a life-and-death matter.

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