

**THE ALLEGORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ARTHUR MILLER’S DRAMATIC WORKS  
WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO DEATH OF A SALESMAN, ALL MY SONS AND  
THE CRUCIBLE**

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Arthur Miller has highlighted in his plays that courage, truth, responsibility and faith must be the central values in a man. He was well aware with the life of middle class Americans which has been reflected in his dramatic works. The major dramatic works of Arthur Miller include-- The Man Who Had All the Luck (1944), All My Sons (1947), Death of a Salesman (1949), The Crucible (1953), A View from the Bridge (1955), A Memory of Two Mondays (1955) and After the Fall (1964).

The word, Allegory signifies a comprehensive metaphor in which objects, characters and actions in a narrative appearance, are associated with narrative itself. The allegory deals with several implications such as ethical, communal, spiritual or political and characters are representatives or spokespersons of abstract views like charity, voracity etc. Thus we can point out that allegory is a tale with two meanings, a literary meaning and symbolic meaning. Coming to examples Jonathan’s Swifts’ *The Battle of the Books* and Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* are best examples to be cited in this context. Allegory generally is divided in two major forms as:

1. The political and the historical allegory.
2. The allegory of abstract themes.

In historical and political allegory, the characters and actions that are demonstrated factually in their turn symbolize historical people and happenings. In the second type, characters stand for metaphysical qualities.

So far as the allegorical aspect of Arthur Miller’s plays is concerned, we can state that the crisis of identity becomes the quest in the plays of Miller. In his plays such as *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *The Crucible*, the protagonists are commonly seen in search of identity. A depth study of Miller’s plays exposes that in America identity crisis was common phenomenon during Miller’s time. Almost all his tragic protagonists such as Willy Loman, Joe Keller, and John Proctor etc. are allegorized and representative characters and they forfeit everything, even their lives in order to maintain their rightful position in the family, society and in the world. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is a spokesperson of Miller’s philosophy of American Way of life. Miller has introduced Willy as an allegory of American business ethics. Both Willy and Joe are same in this sense. They are victims of American Dream. For Joe, an allegory of evil and immorality, there is nothing “bigger than family”. Arthur Miller leaves a hidden message at the end of each his play by dramatizing his tragic heroes engaged in the quest of their dignity in the society. “I’m not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman,” says Willy to his son Biff when he realizes that his identity is in danger. Similarly, John Proctor, metaphor of honesty and integrity, does not surrender his conscience because he is one who cannot live

without good name. He is dishonestly accused for a crime he has not committed. When he is asked to confess for witchcraft and his collaboration with Devil, he bursts out:

“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life!  
Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on  
the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have  
given you my soul; leave me my name!” (*The Crucible*)

Thus, we can point out that Miller’s heroes are always in search for moral values and their search becomes quest allegory. It should also be noted here that the hidden and underline meaning in the plays of Miller is more significant than that of superficial meaning. Gerald Weales sees Miller’s dramatic success and poignancy as residing in his commitment to social problems. In “Arthur Miller: Man and His Image” (*Tulane Drama Review* 7, 1962), Weales sees Miller’s social critique as:

“Built upon the conflict each protagonist experiences between his native  
identity and the image that society demands of him.”

William Wiegand, who belongs to the school that sees Miller as a practical preacher and reformer, maintains that Miller’s heroes are martyrs who surrender to and die an evasive truth that alone ensures salvation in a corrupt society,<sup>1</sup> and Paul West in *Arthur Miller and the Human Mice* (*Hibbert Journal* 61, 1962) refers to Miller’s social concerns by saying that his plays are meant to alert us to the facts of community, pride, and spiritual sanctity. Raymond Williams develops a similar thesis about the social consciousness depicted in Miller’s plays.

Joseph Wood Krutch in *American Drama Since 1918*, finds an analogy between Miller’s intimate contacts with radical groups the social criticism in his works. He therefore concludes that many of Miller’s plays imply a fundamental criticism of the social and moral order and that all his characters are “victims of false convictions and an evil social system.”<sup>2</sup>

As a “sensitive interpreter of American ethos, Miller, Lumley contends, is “the prose writer in the tradition of the social purpose plays of Ibsen.” He is a “psychological playwright with a strong moral commitment” committed in the “fullest sense to a twentieth-century tragedy, the tragedy of common man.”<sup>3</sup> Lumley further suggest two distinct thematic concerns in Miller’s work. Miller’s first group of plays, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *A Memory of Two Mondays*, Lumley says, deals with the tragedy of the common man, and the second group deals with the nightmare of an intellectual guilt complex. However, he sees despair as the predominant mood of Miller’s plays. In *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, Vol. 2 (1984), Bigsby sees Miller as a moral reformer bent on tracing the “social and psychological origins of cultural anxiety.” Bigsby believes that Albee, O’Neill, Williams, and Miller share a belief in the process of transformation involving political action, reform and the restoration of a natural and manifest justice:

“They have all written plays which either directly or indirectly insist on  
the need to change the world in such a way as to accommodate the needs  
of the individual or the mass.”<sup>4</sup>

Following the same broad thesis, Bigsby asserts that for Miller, this process of transformation can only be generated through the “awakening of the moral conscience” and “spiritual liberation” and that his work “becomes an examination of the basis on which the moral world can be reconstructed.”

In Miller's world, the non-conformist cannot survive because the institutional imperatives demand conformity at odds with the character's search for identity. Miller deliberately uses average protagonists instead of the more traditionally outstanding men. As Henry Popkin asserts in the essay "Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter" in *The Sewanee Review*, LXVIII (1960) that Miller's typical protagonist is "a little man always complains" and who is matched with "extraordinary demands" from societal institution against which he must struggle for his survival. Thomas E. Porter suggests in *The Mills of the Gods: Economics and Law in the Plays of Arthur Miller* in *Arthur Miller: New Perspective*, edited by Robert A. Martin (Prentice-Hall, N.J., 1982) that "the economics system is impersonal and the judicial sharply limited" in the world of Miller's protagonists. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Joe Keller in *All My Sons* find themselves caught in the impersonality of the business world. Their dogged pursuit of material success brings them into conflict with their familial responsibilities. Biff finally awakens his father, Willy Loman to the fact that "coming out number one" is not what life is all about; it is the love for the family and Loman's identity as a father that finally counts. Joe Keller repudiates his unscrupulous business practices because they have led to the destructions of "all my sons." Willy Loman and Joe Keller both die because of their inability to blend their struggle for survival and their identities towards a humane goal.

Helen McMahon's archetypal approach to Miller's plays places Miller in the domain of religious writers. In *Arthur Miller's Common man: The Problem of the Realistic and the Mythic* (Drama and Theatre, 10, 1972) McMahon maintains that Miller attempts to establish a 'sub-text of myth' which includes certain archetypal pattern and characters primarily as they appear to be related to the Bible and Judeo-Christian beliefs. Henry Popkin also confirms this archetypal approach to Miller's plays as he attempts to review them as parables. In *Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter* (*American Drama and its Critics*, edited by Alan S. Downer, 1965), Popkin states that Miller's plays are "dramatic parables or fables, their characters are as typical as the prodigal son or Aesop's lambs and wolves. They are as unattached and as non-sectarian as the medieval Everyman and that is why they cannot be individuals." Louis Broussard develops a similar thesis on the lines of archetypal criticism when he refers to Miller's plays as allegories. In *American Drama: Contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neil to Tennessee Williams* (1962), Broussard maintains that Miller's plays are at their best when they attempt to allegorize the fate of man. In his tragedies, Broussard contends, Miller presents characters in

"Whose conflicts the author managed to transcend individual tragedy to include as all in his summation of what is wrong with our world."<sup>5</sup>

Broussard further assert that in his allegorical treatment of man's despair in this world, Miller deliberately excludes God from his plays as he attempts to locate man's despair in man himself and the society.

In *All My Sons*, Millet has introduced Joe Keller as a product of a system which can be defined as follows in the words of Poupard: "The business of America is business."<sup>6</sup> Joe Keller is a limb of a corporation that is madly rushing towards success. Miller, in his Introduction to his *Collected Plays*, writes, "He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member..." Keller tells his son Chris:

"You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?"

According to Raymond Williams, "Tragedy, for us, has been mainly the conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy him."<sup>7</sup> This exactly is the thesis of Arthur Miller. He places his characters in a context bombarded by materialistic and humanistic forces and ensures the destruction of those individuals who stand by materialism.

Miller's heroes, Keller and Loman are two very real products of the post-wars, economically-depressed but morally not bankrupt. America wherein everyone was madly engaged in a pursuit for success, the infamous 'American Dream', by the side of a few fellow citizens voicing a serious concern about the depleting humanism in interpersonal and social contexts. The constructs were and still are: materialism sans humanism, an amalgam of materialism and humanism, and a humanistic materialism. In the complex American dichotomous situation, Miller's tragic protagonists get trounced. He wants the Americans to introspect and find a way out of this moral chaos which could be the worst form of a society's malaise.

Miller creates an unforgettable character in Willy Loman, the hardworking but star-crossed salesman. America is a country which exists solely on its ability to sell itself. The play is considered as a reflection of the depressing market conditions in the aftermath of the Second World War. The play, which focuses on the failure of the career of a salesman, shook the whole country and made people sit up and review the whole business of selling. What the Americans, driven by their materialistic ambitions, woefully failed to perceive was that the failure of the salesman was only an interface juxtaposed with the falling standards of humanism in the American context. It must be identified as a metaphor not only of American middle-class yearnings and failures but of the entire world; the life, dreams and ultimate defeat of Loman symbolizes the tragic dimensions of everyman everywhere in the world. The particular experience of a frustrated salesman rises to universal scales and that speaks for Miller's greatness of thematic conceptualization and an appropriate characterization which convey the meaning holistically.

Death of a Salesman deals with the tribulations of an individual in rewarding himself as a human in contemporary society. This play tactfully formulates an appeal for a restoration to true companionship to reverence for the individual and to discovering some way of gratifying human being's desires in work that contemporary society with its bogus, mask-produced, machine-made goods is ignoring. It is possible that the readers might not like the sources with which Willy is struggling to succeed, but they should glorify his dreams as he is doing so for the wellbeing for himself and his family.

"Miller's recurring themes are the relationship of the individual to society and the personal responsibility that the individual owes to society and the society and society failing the individual."<sup>8</sup>

'Evil is the outcome of the conflict between the social pressure and the individual's will to succeed. The Man Who Had All The Luck exposes a man's struggle in success. In All My Sons Keller says:

"I am his father and he's my sons, and if there's something bigger than that, I'll put a bullet in my head."

Miller tries to earn to sympathy of the audience for him and makes him a Martyr to a false ethic of family and business sentimentality. His heroes are imperfect creatures, mean, boastful and selfish. By making them martyr at the end, Miller seems to have abused his artistic power. But he says he tries to

“Unveil a truth, already knows but not recognized. The theatre can help to make man more human... that is, alone.”<sup>9</sup>

Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* makes use of history as allegory to depict a contemporary situation. The story of *The Crucible* takes us back to the America of the seventeenth century when there was widespread fear of witchcraft. Under the dominance of the church several innocent persons were tortured and put to death. The hero of the play, John Proctor is also falsely accused of witchcraft and there is a trail during which much of the evil and hypocrisy of the orthodox society are exposed. At the end when John Proctor is given a chance to save his life by signing a confession of his complicity, he chooses to be sentenced to death rather than implicate his name in a falsehood that will wipe out his identity. As is well known, tragedy portrays undeserved suffering without leaving us desperate or dejected or obsessed with a feeling of the worthlessness of life. The hero fails or dies, but in his failure or death there is a triumph. Pity and terror are evoked, but at the end there is ‘calm of mind, all passion spent.’ Tragedy shows us life in depth, provokes reactions about the significance in value of and affects us to the roots of our being. Judged by these criteria, *The Crucible* must be regarded as a fairly successful tragedy. Proctor’s decision to die rather than buy life with a false confession is the catastrophe of the play. And the decision is preceded by agonizing soul- searching. Till the very end, he has chance to save himself. With choosing to die answer the question, “what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the world and he lose his own soul?” his suffering and death are underserved and he demonstrates the strength of a moral conviction that can defy death. According to Freedman, *The Crucible* is to be read as:

“A kind of universal account of the powers of evil, those that depend on false accusation and persecution of innocent men”.<sup>10</sup>

In this piece, Miller invokes a historical event as an allegory for the social corruption that he saw recurring in his time, and in turn attempts to address universal issues of evil in the world. Though obviously written as a metaphor for the communist witch-hunt of the MaCarthy era, because it invokes an older story its relevance endures. In some ways, this piece resembles John Bale’s medieval morality play, *King Johan*, in that it is, essentially, an allegory that invokes historical circumstances to address a universal theme. As Miller says in his commentary on this play:

“Since 1692 a great but superficial change has wiped out God’s beard and the Devil’s horns, but the world is still gripped between two diametrically opposed absolutes. The concept of unity in which positive and negative are attributes of the force in which good and evil are relative, ever-changing phenomenon—such a concept is still reserved to the physical sciences and to the few who have grasped the history of ideas.”<sup>11</sup>

The greatest themes at work in *The Crucible*, are repression, paranoia, and desire for power. These are issues that arose in Puritan Salem in 1692, arose again in the 1950s, and could arise again at any moment. Because he chose to set the piece in historical characters, there is less emphasis on the emotional lives of the event for which they stand. John Proctor, despite his



morality questionable behavior and his fiery temper, is the voice of reason. He stands for truth, even if he himself does not discover the end. Abigail Williams represents the danger of sexual repression, the judge Danforth is the corrupt authority unwilling to listen to reason or reevaluates his convictions. Although all these characters have psychological motivation and emotional detail, the ideas they embody are not lost.

Like An Enemy of the People, The Crucible is a play that contains the new invisible villain of society. As in Ibsen's play, there are characters who retain certain elements of old villain, most notably Abigail and judge Danforth, but they all form part of a system of evil. Abigail is the ring leader, the arch-vice, of the play acting girls, who has "an endless capacity of dissembling." If the play were written in a different style, Abigail could be the villain verbatim: the whole piece would be written with her as protagonist, and she could share her glee in the success of her plans with the audience. However, after she sets the plot in motion, her role is minimal. Once she has taken the dramatic backseat, Danforth comes forth to take her place. Miller, who himself said that we no longer believe in "evil in its full bloom as a person," states:

"I didn't make the judge evil enough. I should have gone the whole hog. I should have shown him conspiring with the witnesses to take evidence, which he did, still bring a deeply religious man, a man who could quote any part of Bible at will, who prayed at every opportunity, and met, as is known, with the girls who were as to what they should testify to an hour hence... And the judge was a great actor; he could get himself into a forth and a frenzy knowing, at the same time, that he had manufactured the whole thing."

(Morality and Modern Drama, p. 210-11)

In other words, Miller wishes that he had made the judge a villain in the classical tradition. However, if the judge or Abigail were a villain, they would be entirely anachronistic. Despite its strong allegorical framework, The Crucible is still written in a realistic style not in the heightened style of classical tragedy. Miller would have broken the fourth wall, infuse his villain with the sublime, and give them a much more pervasive role than they have. Instead, he chose to have Abigail and Danforth as the leading characters in a group, consisting of Parris, Hale, Cheever, the girls, and other members of the town, who together comprise the villain of the piece.

The Crucible is one of the most iconic American works of the twentieth century and one of the few plays in the modern mainstream that explicitly addresses the question of evil. There is no question that Miller is a morally and politically conscious playwright, but there may always be a discrepancy between an artist's intentions and the external perception of their work. Although we are aware of Miller's political and moral interests from his essays, commentaries, and interviews, Wellman is still justified in his condemnation within the plays themselves. By admitting that he "didn't make the Judge evil enough," Miller is essentially conceding to Wellman that he is afraid of addressing evil "in its full bloom as a person," and so is neglecting a certain discussion of the evil inherent in humanity in favor of psychological realism.

Most of Arthur Miller's characters are in search for their identity, suffering crisis of consciousness they are confronted with a situation that they are incapable of meeting. Willy

Loman, Joe Keller and John Proctor end in death by their lack of self-understanding. All of them are victims. Some critics have criticized Miller for infusing the play, *Death of a Salesman* with a deep sense of pity for the common place salesman, Willy Loman. They are of the view that Willy is a “little man” and therefore is not worthy of the pathos reserved for such tragic heroes as Oedipus and Medea. Miller, however, has argued that the tragic feeling is invoked whenever we are in the presence of a character, any character, who is ready to sacrifice his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. And the ‘little’ salesman was determined to do just that, no matter what the cost. Miller presents the crisis as a conflict between the uncomprehending self and the social and economic structure. Investigation of human nature and human plight, the attempt of defining man’s identity are recurrent themes in the plays of Arthur Miller.

*Death of a Salesman* is regarded as America’s prototypical play, has revolved around Willy Loman’s presumed Jewish background. The play, a borderline allegory, goes to great lengths with its suggestive realism so that Willy Loman’s individuality is broadened to become a thematic representation of the dismal failure of the American Dream. *Death of a Salesman* is an attempt to mirror the struggles of modern characters who live in the world of postmodernism but are the slave of the preventive belief of modernism. The play is the story of all human beings who are in search of success, love, pride and ambition, but are oscillating between the modern and postmodern values. Willy Loman’s untimely but purposeful death offers a striking proof that the application of false values cannot have a positive end, regardless of how passionately they are ascribed by the individual.

Brain Parker recognizes that *Death of a Salesman* calls upon the morality tradition of the psychomachia, in which all the characters and events represent opposing ideals “as though strained through Willy’s mind.” This play, like several of Miller’s plays, is a hybrid of two styles: on the one hand, it is a domestic drama of an American family in the 1950s, on the other hand, it is an allegory of the “Low Man” in American society and how he is ultimately destroyed by it. (Freedman)

In *This Dramatic World: Using Contemporary Dramas in Church* (1970) Edyvean, using *Death of a Salesman* as a play that deals with man’s moral dilemma, asserts that Willy Loman and his problems represent the universal human predicament. Loman’s destruction, he says, is a direct consequence of his exceptional pride and his mistake in choosing the wrong values. Edyvean concludes that Arthur Miller’s plays are concerned with “man caught in a moral dilemma in which he must choose right from wrong.” To Edyvean, Miller’s plays uphold honesty to one’s self and right choice as prime virtues of Christian living.

In Miller’s view, the most important problem which modern man faces today is the problem of survival and identity and that social drama, to be truly effective, must address questions. With “the whole that is man” as his main subject, Miller believes that modern drama should educate people as to how they can “make of the outside world a home” without losing their sense of personal dignity. In other words, Miller is concerned with how individuals can survive without giving up their identity. In Modern drama, the hero’s search for self-awareness is not always so easily comprehended. A character’s search for recognition and self-identity is the centrality of all of Miller’s dramas.

Metaphorically, Willy Loman goes through three “deaths”. His identity as a father had died the afternoon that Biff caught him with a woman in the Boston Hotel; he had died as a salesman the day he returned tired and exhausted from Boston after selling no merchandise; and he finally precipitated his physical death by committing suicide. And in all these types of deaths, we see Willy pursuing business success as a means of bolstering his family identity as a father and breadwinner. These metaphorical deaths symbolizes crisis of identity in Willy Loman. Finally his suicide, an act done in the name of love for Biff and his family, reasserts his basic family identity. As Bigsby explains that Willy is firmly located in the context of his family life, he lives and dies in an attempt to sustain a sense of personal dignity and meaning.<sup>12</sup>

After the Fall is the most introspective play that Miller has written. It has assumed the form of an interior dialogue, a progress in a self-discovery accomplished without a psychiatrist. “This play”, Miller wrote in the Forward:

“is a trail; the trial of a man by his own conscience, his own values, his own deeds. The Listener (an unseen character addressed by Quentin, the protagonist) who to some will be psychoanalyst, to other God, is Quentin himself turned at the edge of the abyss to look at his experience, his nature and his time.”

After the Fall is an allegory of the Fall of Man. Quentin’s self-trail is an attempt to come to terms with his identity, after realizing the inhumanity of his struggle to survive—a struggle which has destroyed two of his previous marriages. Taking the play as a matrix of this thematic development, Reno asserts that Miller’s plays are allegorical expositions of the process of the death of God, a process in which the authority figure (God) is ostracized from the society by the rebellious and idealistic son who no longer has faith in the father. He finds the “image of God withering in the merciless gaze of a worshiper whose eyes have been opened” and, as in *After the Fall*, abdicating His bench as a Judge.<sup>13</sup> Reno believes that Miller’s works reveal a world empty of theology, a world in which there is nothing left but a kind of sociology, “the doctrine of man’s responsibility for man.” Following in the footsteps of critics who see Miller as preoccupied with spiritual emptiness, Jean Gould in *Modern American Playwrights* (1966) says that Arthur Miller’s prominence lies in his ability to assume the “mantle of Robert Sherwood as the public conscience of America.” He further asserts that Miller is a popular playwright “because he has touch of common speech mingled with democratic idealism, poetic expression, and an ancient people’s capacity for understanding the anguish of the soul.” Leonard Moss sees this “anguish of the soul” as a direct consequence of the Fall of man. In *Arthur Miller* (1980), Moss asserts that Miller has always shown a strong interest in the Fall theme—the crisis of disillusionment—from the start of his career in the early 1940’s. Hence, Moss concludes, Miller’s works are “allegorical commentary on man’s maladjustment here and now.”<sup>14</sup>

At the end, it is exposed here on the basis of Arthur Miller’s major dramatic works such as *Death of Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *The Crucible* that Miller has been very vigilant playwright of his era who has articulated severe realities not only of the society in which he lived but of the whole world. Through his allegorical protagonists, Miller has drawn our attention to the social evils prevailing in our society. The underlying moral and message, which Miller has disclosed at the end of his each play, is applicable to all human beings and the subject matter of plays is appropriate in Indian context also. As a matter of fact, culture, climate and soil differ across the world but man is the same, mankind is the same, so Miller’s plays can be studied in Indian



context too. Since literature is the product of a particular society, it responds to the social, economic and cultural conditions of that society whose product it is. Miller was very cautious to the every happening of his country, so he has depicted in his plays contemporary condition of his country. As far as the social applicability of Arthur Miller's plays is concerned, his plays represent satisfactorily all classes of his country and sometimes transcend the nation's boundary and get objects of the whole world. Hence his plays are universal phenomenon.

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