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ARTHUR MILLER: WORLD OF GUILT AND HIS CHANGING VISION

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Arthur Miller's work has ever been a subject of heated and controversial discussion among critics. It seems to baffle them because of his total slumping to the level of a debased disciple of Ibsen, and his over eagerness to be a penetrating critic of American society and an innovator in the theatre. As there is some irrepressible truth in these views, his plays present a variety of themes, and being a highly conscious artist, his obsessive preoccupation with fundamental problems of homosapiens is at the bottom of a contemporary necessity, emerged from the human nature.

Of these human conditions, a persistent thread running through Miller's writing, which he has imbibed from his Norwegian master, is his concern for the guilt-ridden life of man. Miller came to maturity through the agonies of the depression and the political turmoil's of the forties, when "guilt was in the air" capitalists accused of responsibility for the economic condition and imperialists of responsibilities for the deteriorated international situation. So the situation was ripe for him to the skillful maneuvering of the subject of human guilt, which he had

focused attention on, more than any other aspect of life. Thus Henry Popkin, opening his discussion of the nature of Miller's plays, observes:

Arthur Miller's regular practice in his plays is to confront the dead levels of banality with the heights depths of guilt and to draw from this strange encounter a liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility.

A close scrutiny of his mature full-length plays shows the same basic pattern, and guilt appears in the midst of banality. Each play is constructed to expose a pattern of guilt to find out who is guilty, and punishment is imposed, directly or indirectly by the victim himself. Although all of Miller's plays deal with some aspect of guilt, the narrative schemes of at least half a dozen of his plays are alike in projecting the movement from the depth of the past misdeeds to the surface of the preset bitter consequences; on the light of this, and analysis is made here to highlight it in his four plays, All My Sons, Death of a salesman, The crucible and After the Fall.

Guilt is an inheritance of the Judaeo-Christian culture. In Judaeo-

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Christian theology, all mankind was stained with the guilt of original sin through Adam and Eve, and thus, it was man who had created disorder, disharmony and imperfection in God's harmonious and perfect universe, with his "fall" from grace. However, he comes to realize that the fall is the fall into existence as a conscious being and it results in total divorce from the rest of world. His fall into consciousness give birth to knowledge and in effect, he was not only aware of his fallen nature, but of the imperfection and cruelty of the life around him. The new-born self-awareness becomes the primary cause of man's guilt. This cultural heritage of Miller was added with the 'Americanness' of the theme, originated from the belief that America was a originally a new garden of Eden, a second paradise on earth since the settlement, and they embodied the beauty and innocence of the original Adam without guilt.

It stimulates Miller to deal with the imperfection and guilt-laden life of man, a prime concern in his place. In Miller's early plays, *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, Miller reverses the archetypal Edenic situation by focusing attention on the father, the mythical symbol of authority, by making him the source of guilt. In doing so, Miller depicts a modern attitude of man's guilt as being imperfect, which is an element of hereditary guilt. Here, Miller's approach is traditional and follows the usual pattern of wrong-doing and its after-

math as seen since the time of Greek tragedy.

From this early place, a gradual development in Miller's vision can be traced through his next of group of plays consisting of *The Crucible*, *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* in which he exposes the existence of universal evil and the need world's evil, instead of giving emphasis to individual guilt. The 'fallen' man acquires the fundamental drive for self-assertion and self-preservation that makes conflict an unavoidable corollary of human relationships causing man's betrayal and even destruction of those he loves. Thus, Miller pays more attention to the issue of man's relationship with other men, especially in view of the fact that all are 'fallen'. Because human beings fail to be embodiments of intended perfection, the factor that they should feel guilty, becomes important.

The concept of America as a second paradise cracked with the 'crash' of 1929 and the Depression which followed it. Miller became convinced that there was an invisible world behind the apparent one, and he began to search for the hidden laws that would explain this catastrophe. The vital connection existing between the private destiny of the individual and the outside world, in which the vaster social forces are at work, is at the centre of the whole technique of retrospective narration fashioned by Miller, and particularly in his overtly social plays. This throws light on

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his constant concern with causes, actions, and the consequences of actions in the Ibsenite tradition. Until the production of *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, the whole process of cause and effect was subverted because of his heavy reliance's on coincidence. With his new play *All My Sons*, he was determined 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". The effort for the exploration of the relationship between past actions and present consequences was perfectly accomplished in his plays. The common devices in Ibsen's domestic tragedies which has evidently caught Miller's attention, has come to be known as "fatal secret" or the secret of the long-buried guilt in the family.

Ronald Hayman has rightly said that in *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *The Prices*, "the characters have committed themselves to courses of action which have their roots in the past : the play cannot move forwards without moving backwards to dig them up." This resurrection of the past or objective recollection is unthinkable to Miller's British contemporaries like Beckett or Pinter and 'avant-garde' art has questioned the possibility of isolating anything as the cause of anything else. However, Miller's basic pattern of dramatic action has been to seize a situation, thick with shadow of the past. The crises-crossing of the past and present, caused the awakening to a sense of

guilt and immorality associated with the past action. The interaction between the past and the present with the 'fatal secret' in Ibsen's problem plays, which has been a fillip to Miller's dramatic world, is analysed by Eric Bentley in the course of his discussion of Ibsen's dramaturgy:

Historians of drama explain that Ibsen took over from the Parisian hacks the story of the long-buried secret that eventually leaks out with sensational results. They sometimes forget to add that Ibsen saw life itself as a placid surface through which, from time to time, what seemed dead and buried will break- a present into which the 'vanished' past returns.

However there is a principal difference in the attitude of the two dramatists in handling the long-buried deep secret. Whereas Ibsen is primarily concerned with the consequences of the past action, Miller is more interested in the reaction which follows understanding. Besides, in Miller, the moment of awareness is always preparation for a moment of choice. However Miller's use of the lurking secrets, erupting in the life of the protagonist with sensational and tragic consequences, has invited charges of melodrama and oversimplification.

In his brilliant study on Arthur Miller, Leonard Moss has rightly pointed out that the narrative schemes of *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A*

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View from the Bridge and .After the fall are remarkably alike and despite Miller's wide-ranging experiments with form, the methods of bringing the hidden guilt to light only vary. Relying on an inescapable casual movement from past action to present reaction in the Ibsenite fashion, hidden guilt is first referred to covertly, then bared in a climatic revelation in each work. Thus, All My Sons and Death of a Salesman are structured around a quality past which increasingly intrudes into the present with devastating consequences. In the case of Joe Keller, a definite crime returns to destroy him; in Willy Loman's situation, a life-time of lies and lapses determine his catastrophic fate, if not as clearly delineated, as Keller's. John Proctor confesses his sins. The moral lapse of Proctor, in having made advances to the maid, hits back and later his obstinate decision to fight against the sinister forces in society, does not allow him to surrender his conscience.

Quentin's self-knowledge of his own egotism, cruelty and evil is the main cause of his guilt and self-awareness enables him to arrive at a conclusion that all men are touched with guilt. The sin in All My Sons and The Crucible is suggested by verbal allusions of the protagonist's behavior; Death of a Salesman and After the Fall modify that procedure with memory surveys and the technique of psychic projection and of hallucination. When the exposition of the hidden evil comes into view, it leads to a surprising

transition from one issue to another and it causes antagonism to develop between the loved ones; the transition is extended in the argument of the characters in which it transfers from one group at the outset to another group at the end of each play.

In Miller's earlier plays evil is mainly seen as external, but in his later plays, it emerges as an essential part of human nature. Whatever personal contributions Miller's heroes may make to their misfortunes, the main burden of guilt is usually borne by the dominant forces in the society. By indicating parents, Miller shows that, at the Centre of All My Sons and Death of a Salesman there is an absolute revolt of a son against his father; in each play, a son painfully discovers his father's weakness and his honesty. However, the hidden forces enveloping the corrupt patents in the callous business world contribute greatly to their weakness. Building his business for his two sons, Joe Keller is so attracted by the 'dog-eat-dog' system of the capitalistic society that he neglects his responsibility toward all the sons of the world.

Joe Keller's illusion, that he buried the past safely to lead a clean citizen's life, emerges from the present action like a ghost from the past. It comes to the force, through Ibsen's retrospective method as in Ghosts, to expose a guilt-laden past and thus "the inter-relationship between previous actions and is crucial to the pattern and meaning of All My Sons". Joe's guilt

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is established by the end of the Second Act when his son Chris produces a letter in which his other son Larry, an extravagant idealist, killed himself while discovering his father's incredible responsibility in the defective engine scandal. As Paul Blumberg says, "While Joe cannot see beyond his family's dining-room table, Chris feels a sense of unity with the world." Thus, polluted by sharing in the illicit spoils of the war, Joe, the uncomplicated materialist, recognizes that the twenty-one pilots who died were "all my sons" and in expiation he kills himself. In an Ibsenesque way, Miller imposes the penalty of death after discovering the guilty and the purpose of *All My Sons* was, according to Miller, "to bring a man into the direct path of the consequences he was wrought"

So long as we suffer from this existential guilt, we need not despair because awareness is the first and foremost requisite in the solution of the problem. A recognition of our common imperfections may result in a sharing our guilt and understanding and it will generate greater humanity and fellow-feeling. Miller has not only been able to explore and diagnose the virus of guilt, eating into the structure of our society, but has also pointed out the

way out of the pervasive malady in his later plays. Against the growing pessimism prevalent in the current American theatre, Miller's plays, thus, give us a message of hope, resolution and greater involvement with life's problems.

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