



Interrogating the common man of Arthur Miller's tragedies

Simrat Khurana

Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Abstract

Arthur Miller in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" stresses on the point that common man is fit as a subject of tragedy. In the modern industrial society, a common man is as apt a tragic hero as some prince or king of earlier tragedies. This paper attempts to figure out who this common man is and what is required of him to fit into the role of a tragic hero. This will be done by analyzing Miller's plays published in the first edition of *The Collected Plays* in 1957 including *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, and *A View from the Bridge*.

Keywords: tragedy, common man, industrial automat, tragic hero, conscience

Introduction

Arthur Miller in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" has presented the case of common man for being fit as a tragic hero in modern drama. Miller's plays are clear evidence of this as he chooses common subjects of industrial and capitalist society as his characters. The present paper will attempt to analyze the basic characteristics of the tragic heroes of Miller's published play in order to understand who is the common man whom Miller represents as tragic hero and what is required of him to rise to the level of a tragedy. The paper will analyze the tragic characters of his plays published in the first edition of *The Collected Plays* in 1957 including *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, and *A View from the Bridge*.

Miller's common man is a product of industrial and capitalist society be it the businessman Joe Keller of *All My Sons*; salesman Willy Loman in *The Death of a Salesman*; longshore Eddie and lawyer Alfieri of *A View from the Bridge*; or the characters Guss, Jim, Burt, Kenneth and others working in auto-parts warehouse in the play *A Memory of Two Mondays*. The only play in the collected edition in which the characters seem to be different from other plays is *The Crucible* as the play is set around the time of Salem Witch Hunts of 1692. However, even in *The Crucible*, Miller uses Salem Witch Hunts allegorically. The witch-hunts in fact are representative of McCarthyism/ The Second Red Scare of 1950s.

Miller's common man is trying to accommodate himself in the new scheme of things of the modern world. The characters of the play *A Memory of Two Mondays* i.e. Jim, Guss, Larry and others have spent most of their lives working in the auto-parts warehouse trying to fit in "the machine tending pattern" of the industrial age. The reality of the industrial and capitalist world comes to front through a dialogue in the play, "There's something terrible here ... Everyday I see the same people getting on and the same people getting off. And all that happens is that they get older. God, It scares me (358)." The world seems like a big room to Bert where people are riding back and forth without an end in sight. The life has turned mechanic and people have turned into automats. Terry Orton is of the view that, "Miller was a vigorous critic of what he saw as the corrosive ethos of a capitalistic system that could justify the disregard of the poor and the disenfranchised (133)."

An important symbol of cleaning windows is used in the play. Kenneth stresses on cleaning the windows in order to be able to see the sky and seasons passing by. However, once the windows are cleaned what comes to view is a brothel. This symbolizes the ugly side of industrial and capitalist society. Bert, the youngest of all the workers, is the only character in the play who gets a chance to go out. He says in the play,

I don't understand; I don't know anything; How is it me that gets out...
I don't understand how they come every morning,
Every morning and every morning,
And no end in sight.
That's the thing-there's no end!
Oh, there ought to be a statue in the park-
"To all the ones that stay." (370)

Miller builds a statue for all those through this play. However, it is ironic that not even a single character of the play that rises to the heights of a tragic hero and the play only serves the purpose of dissecting society and even the play cannot be viewed as a conventional tragedy. It becomes certain then that not every common man who is

just a cog in the machine in the industrial society turns to be a tragic hero even in Miller's plays. Something else is also required of him. In his essay "Social Plays" Miller says, "So long as modern man conceives of himself valuable only because he fits into some niche in the machine-tending pattern; he will never know anything more than a pathetic doom (102)." Guss dies in the play of this pathetic doom and the same pathetic doom awaits all the characters of the play.

In the other play *A View from the Bridge*, Eddie Carbone brings into focus the tragic integrity of his character. Eddie's tragic integrity comes to front through his honesty in unashamedly being himself. He does not shy away hiding any part of his personality, not even his animalistic side. Beatrice, Eddie's wife, tells Catherine in the play that if Eddie belongs to garbage for betraying his family then in fact everyone belongs to garbage. Despite his tragic integrity he nevertheless meets a pathetic doom in the end. The pathetic doom results out from the ugliness of his betrayal of his family and his infidelity towards his cultural codes and social values. Alfieri declares towards the end of the play how wrong Eddie was and his death useless.

The characters who truly rise to the level of tragic hero in Miller's plays are Joe Keller (*All My Sons*), Willy Loman (*The Death of a Salesman*), and John Proctor (*The Crucible*). These are the men, who try to secure their personal dignity. These tragic heroes of Miller are not just automats but have conscience of their own. Tom F. Driver even classifies Miller's tragedies as belonging to "the theatre of heightened consciousness (47)." Most important of all, Miller's tragic hero understands his social responsibility toward the world out there. Miller's tragedies represent his belief in a social order, which is governed by moral and social responsibilities of an individual. Miller in the introduction to *The Collected Plays* says, "I wanted to make the moral world as real and evident as the immoral one so splendidly is" (19) and he in fact becomes successful in doing so through his play *All My Sons*.

Joe Keller of *All My Sons* is a "man among men" (59) in Miller's own words. He is however different from the characters of other plays in his profession. Joe Keller unlike other characters who are mostly workers belongs to another niche of the society i.e. the upper class. He is a businessman, who tried to make profit during war. He supplies faulty cylinders to air force during the war, resulting in the death of 21 pilots, the entire blame of which he later on puts on his business partner to avoid going to jail. He justifies this by believing this action of his being necessary to save his business and the "forty foot front" (121) of his house, which is the world to him. In confrontation with his son Chris he says, "Who worked for nothing in the war?... It's dollars and cents; nickels and dimes; war and peace; it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half of the goddamn country gotta go if I go" (125).

Miller, however, has not justified this worldview of Joe Keller in the play. His worldview is that of social accountability which has been appropriate in the play through Chris' character. Chris questions his father's justification of his actions by asking him,

"For me!-I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me... What is that, the world-business? What the hell do you mean you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? (116)

Nevertheless, Joe Keller ultimately rises to the level of a tragic hero by accepting his mistake. "Miller approaches tragedy not as a depiction of the moment a character confronts his flawed self-narrative but as a depiction of his characters' floundering to find a new psychological equilibrium after the confrontation has occurred, "after the fall" ("Self and Tragedy" 57). Keller admits to his offense and the consequences it bore. He understands his social responsibility in which he failed earlier after reading a letter sent from his elder son Larry, whose life was also lost in the war while defending his country. Joe comprehends that he was responsible for the deaths of various pilots who served in the war like his own son Larry. He ultimately realizes that they were all his sons and evaluates his actions justly by shooting himself to preserve his dignity.

Willy Loman in the play *The Death of a Salesman* is another product of the capitalist society. In this society, man is busy making money but even after accumulating wealth he is lonely as Happy points out in the play. This alienation is the result of modern industrial and capitalist society and Willy Loman shares it with the characters of *A Memory of Two Mondays* and *A View from the Bridge*. But, he is also above them as he does not conceive of himself just as a part of "the machine-tending process." He considers that "man is not a fruit" (181). For him there is a need greater than hunger, thirst, and sex. It is the need for immortality. He strongly believes that he will leave a thumbprint somewhere in the world. It is this desire, which according to Biff is a phony dream that sets him apart from others. According to Miller, Willy is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life which machine civilization deprives people of.

It is also because of this desire that Willy sells himself. Miller in one of his interviews when asked what Willy Loman was selling, answered 'Himself'. Willy is aware of his mistakes and his conscience does not allow him to get rid of his past mistakes. He is guilty and therefore commits suicide. Both Joe Keller and Willy Loman prove that they are not valueless men by admitting their guilt. Miller seems to be stressing on the need of values and conscience in the common man living in the modern society deprived of values.

The need of conscience is also stressed in the play *The Crucible*. The Salem Witch Hunts provides a cover for McCarthyism in the play. In the Introduction to *Collected Plays* Miller says about the McCarthy Era that "above all horrors, I saw accepted the notion that conscience was no longer private matter but one of state administration. I saw man handing conscience to other men for the opportunity of doing so (40)." The result of what happens after handing conscience to state administration becomes clearly visible in the play and corresponds with the McCarthyian Era as well.

The characters in the play, who kill their conscience and falsely admit their connections to the devil to save themselves are spared but the characters with their conscience alive like Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor suffer. John is given a chance towards the end of the play to save himself and he agrees first and admits his connections with the devil but when asked for a written note he says, "I have given you my soul; leave me my name" (328). He finally decides to stand by truth and prefers to be hanged. When Hale asks Elizabeth to stop John, she says, "he have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!" (329). In the process of admitting his guilt of having relationship with Abigail and finally claiming his conscience, he rises to the level of a tragic hero. The play also raises an important question in relation to the tragic outcome for the character Rebecca Nurse. It is stated that Rebecca is to be hanged. Rebecca, who is shown as paradigm of virtue, suffers in the play. Nevertheless, she is not the tragic hero. No doubt she becomes a near tragic figure but the title of the tragic hero remains reserved for John Proctor. It seems that Miller has not given voice to Rebecca's tragedy. Also if we look at other plays no other woman character emerges as a tragic figure. Agnes and Patricia in *A Memory of Two Mondays*, Beatrice and Catherine in *A View from the Bridge*, Mother in *All My Sons*, and Linda in *The Death of a Salesman* are common women of modern age. However, it seems as if Miller fails to talk about their adherence to social values, their social responsibility and most importantly, their having a clear conscience as not even a single woman character emerges to be the tragic hero.

A pattern thus emerges from these plays. Miller's common man is the 'man' living in the industrial and capitalist society of his times. But a mere common man who is just a cog in the machine without the ability to question the order of things in the world does not rise to the stature of a tragic hero as becomes visible through the example of these five plays. To be a tragic hero in Miller's plays requires conscience on the part of a common man and his admittance to moral values and his social responsibility. The common man who understands his duty towards his community is the one who also suffers at the hands of industrial and capitalist society and ultimately meets his tragedy.

References

1. "Arthur Miller: Self and Tragedy." *The Arthur Miller Journal*, Spring-Fall, 2014: (1-2): 57-78. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/arthurmillj.9.1-2.57.
2. Miller, Arthur. *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*. The Viking Press, 1957.
3. "Tragedy and the Common Man." *Collected Essays*, Penguin, 2014.
4. "On Social Plays." *Collected Essays*, Penguin, 2014.
5. Driver, Tom F. "Strength and Weakness in Arthur Miller." *The Tulane Drama Review*, 1960: 4(4): 45-52. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1124878.
6. Otten, Terry. "The Legacy of Arthur Miller." *The Arthur Miller Journal*, no. 1/2, Fall, 2012: 7: 131-142. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42909497.