ARTHUR MILLER: AN ATTEMPT AT MODERN TRAGEDY

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The two highly successful plays of Arthur Miller, All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949), have been frequently characterized as “unforgettable,” “shattering,” “devastating,” “overpowering,” “poignant,” but reviewers have rarely considered them, as I propose to do, as examples of one of the oldest and most respected of literary forms—dramatic tragedy. Nor is this approach a novel critical fetish. The plays themselves have in them certain elements which demand that they be judged as studies in the tragic mode—that is to say, as something more than realistic reproductions, however searching, of a gloomier side of modern American life—and Miller himself has written an informal critical manifesto, propounding his own particular theory of tragedy and asking that his plays be referred to it. To fail to do so is to rob the plays of their intended and, I think, essential meaning.

But before analyzing Miller’s view of tragedy one must reconsider the traditional view, originally formulated by Aristotle and his critics, which Miller has adapted and reinterpreted. In the very broadest terms, then, the Aristotelian tradition defined tragedy as the imitation in prescribed dramatic form of a serious, complete human action, of great enough significance to be worthy of representation, which will strike the audience with pity and fear, two emotions far removed from sentimental tears. The hero of such a piece must be neither perfectly virtuous nor completely base but rather a man, great yet humanly fallible, who is preordained to suffer because of the fate of his inward character and a catastrophic series of events in the outward world. Also, he must never die ignorant of the circumstances of his fall; at some point in the course of the action, usually just before his death, he must undergo the painful process of discovery or revelation through which he will come to understand the reasons for and the significance of his role and thus may make the so-called “tragic reconciliation” with life. Tragedy must always, Aristotle specified, be idealized, both in the sense that the poet as philosopher deals with ideal and universal truth and also in the sense that he portrays his characters as men far above the average in social standing and intellectual and spiritual power.
This last point hints at a basis of tragedy which Aristotle doubtless considered too obvious to elaborate—that classical tragedy embodied a fundamental belief in the dignity and inherent nobility of man. Only if man was great and his moral choices and ethical convictions of vast importance to the universe as a whole, could the story of his fall be made marvelous and arouse the requisite emotions of pity and fear. The fall of a noble man was worthy of the highest forms of poetry and was calculated, through its very magnitude, to strike the audience dumb not to reduce it to tears of maudlin sympathy. The classical tragedian was at heart an optimist, his ultimate exclamation being not the pity but the wonder of it all, and it was not empty literary convention which led him to conceive of man as most fittingly portrayed as a king whose crowns and robes were symbolic of inward greatness.

Accepting these standards, some modern writers have claimed that tragedy can no longer be written and, indeed, only imperfectly understood because the one absolute requirement, a belief in the dignity of man, is no longer possible. The reasons usually given for this decline (a general loss of religious faith, the questioning skepticism of the scientific spirit, and so on) need not concern us, only the end result: if man does not believe in an ordered universe, he cannot assign himself a fixed place; if he has no faith in himself, he cannot echo Hamlet’s description of man, “in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!” Amid the growing political and economic complexities of our time, few have been able to proclaim that man is the master of things but rather their pitiful victim, and tragedy has become sentimentality. Again, it is symptomatic that the hero of a modern “tragedy” is not pictured as a king but as an average person, more often than not as a man well below average both in social and economic status and intelligence.

Miller, however, has in turn rejected this modern denial of the possibility of tragedy. In a careful article entitled “Tragedy and the Common Man,” published in the New York Times, February 27, 1949, he has reinterpreted the traditional view. Tragedy, he begins, is not an archaic form; current ideas do not forbid it. Indeed, the common man is as proper a subject for tragedy as a king; external evidence of greatness is unimportant, for both share, after all, the same mental processes and emotional patterns. Whether the hero be king or commoner, “the tragic feeling

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1 See the suggestive chapter, “The Tragic Fallacy,” in Joseph Wood Krutch’s The Modern Temper (1929), to which I am greatly indebted. Quotations from the works of Arthur Miller are made with the kind permission of the publishers, The Viking Press.
is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity.” The tragic struggle is one of a man attempting to assert his place in the sun and to affirm his importance, whether for the first time or to recapture something once possessed and lost. Few will rebel in such a manner, and we, the more passive onlookers, are struck with pity and fear because we so far identify ourselves with the hero to be afraid of “being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.” Some kind of enlightenment or revelation remains essential (whether on the part of the hero or the audience, Miller does not specify); otherwise we are left with mere pathos, the meaningless destruction of an unconscious animal.

In more modern times, Miller continues, tragedy is not possible if our view of life is completely psychiatric or sociological—the one posits that our indignities are all internal and thus invalidates external action; the other so far shifts our interest from individual to mass man that the tragedy of one is unbelievable and irrelevant. Miller agrees that tragedy is essentially optimistic. A creative struggle for self-realization inspires the highest opinions of mankind not the lowest. Furthermore, tragedy must always contain the possibility of success; it is only pathos when a man fights a battle lost before begun. All of this is true of the king as of the common man, and since we no longer believe in the former, the latter is the only suitable subject for tragedy in our time. Miller’s own two plays are based on his precepts.

*All My Sons* is a remarkably successful attempt to portray the typical American: the setting, a middle class suburban home in the midwest, the characters, a selfmade business man and his unpretentious family, the moral background, belief in material success and in the immediate family as the ultimate social and moral unit—all distill the essence from many American lives. Joe Keller, the tragic hero, has attempted to assert his importance by the achievement of material success which is largely unselfish: his struggles, leading from boyhood poverty to prosperity in the ownership of a small factory, have been guided by love of his family and a desire to see his sons better off than himself. In the process, however, he has committed a crime. During the war he had deliberately permitted faulty aeronautical equipment to leave his factory, and twenty-one fliers were killed. A meek partner has been allowed to take the blame and go to prison, while he himself has gone on to greater success with peacetime conversion, the only flaw being the death of his son, a pilot in the war.
His other son, Chris, has returned from the war with a moral viewpoint as universal as his father’s is provincial: the fate of mankind as a whole is the ultimate consideration, not the good of one individual and his family. The action plays itself out in the tense struggle between father and son, as the latter makes the inevitable, terrible discovery that his father stands for everything he has fought. Keller remains for a time morally unenlightened. He had merely countenanced an irregularity to keep the attainments of a lifetime, and he defends himself by an appeal to general American conduct: “It’s dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it’s nickels and dimes, what’s clean?” When he tells his son that it was done for him, Chris replies:

For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me!—I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? I was so proud you were helping us win and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world—the business? What are you made of, dollar bills? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in the world?

Enlightenment comes, however, with the discovery of a long-concealed letter from his dead son, saying that he is going to commit suicide to avoid the disgrace of being the son of such a father. At last Keller understands and is willing to go to prison to atone. When his wife says that their dead son would never tell him to suffer needlessly, he answers: “What is this [the letter] if it isn’t telling me? Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, kid... I guess they were.” And his living son drives the lesson home, that in striving to better himself he had committed a crime against humanity: “You can be better! Once and for all you can know now that the whole earth comes in through those fences; there’s a universe outside and you’re responsible to it, and if you’re not, you threw your son away, because that’s why he died!” But his father, his life gone with the illusion that governed it, has also killed himself.

Death of a Salesman follows a remarkably similar pattern. Willy Loman has also lived by a success illusion: he has attempted to assert himself by applying a Rotarian philosophy of personality. A man is a “big shot” if he is liked by his associates (“not liked but well liked”) because of his ability to talk, to joke, to know people and to have contacts, to possess a breezy,
assured manner—to sell himself, in short, through surface manner and not innate worth. His belief is far less substantial than Joe Keller’s, for, as a salesman not a manufacturer, he has fewer material possessions to sustain it—he can only evaluate himself through the smiles on other people’s faces, and as he grows older and business methods change, the smiles are beginning to fade.

His attempt to realize his own idea of his importance has been illusory, and he is beginning, partially, to recognize it. He confesses to his wife that he talks too much, that people laugh at him and call him “the walrus.” But one of his sons sees the situation more clearly, for Willy has not only lived by his philosophy himself but has also inculcated it into his sons with disastrous results—one is like his father, the other, Biff, a hopeless drifter and even a petty thief. Biff explains to his father and the audience, telling Willy that his philosophy is “hot air,” that he is “a dime a dozen,” “a dollar an hour,” and advising, “Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?” We never know whether or not this understanding extends beyond Biff and the audience to Willy. With the collapse of his illusion his mind is failing and his ability to see himself objectively seriously impaired. But he must have glimpses of the truth, for he seeks to atone for his miscomprehension of essentials by committing suicide to leave the insurance money to his sons that they may be better.

Both plays, then, are similar and represent a working out of Miller’s theories: common men proclaiming their dignity by devotion to success “myths” and being cast down by the moral order of the universe (speaking through their sons) against which they have sinned, one definitely, the other perhaps realizing the significance of his story.

But has Miller been consistent to his own theory? The problem of discovery or comprehension of significance is not convincingly solved. Joe Keller seems to understand at the end, but one doubts that he is really intelligent enough to grasp the complete truth; Willy Loman’s mind is at times unbalanced, a condition which surely negates the possibility of convincing enlightenment. It is strange that Miller, who warned against psychiatrics in tragedy, should have poached on his own forbidden territory. One may well ask if enlightenment on the part of the audience is an effective substitute for enlightenment on the part of the hero. Surely part of the terrible power of tragedy is sacrificed when the hero must die without understanding.

But Miller has also, it seems to me, left unheeded his own warning concerning sociological inference. In both plays there
are bold hints that the system is responsible for the plight of the man. Joe Keller says that he only did what everyone did. What is individual guilt? he asks, but his question remains unanswered. Willy Loman is certainly as much the victim of an economic system as of a self-created illusion; his wife makes to her sons a speech which rings suspiciously like an indictment of society:

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

Any attempt to ascribe importance to environment must proportionally detract from the importance of the individual, and tragedy will become a pathetic case study of preordained failure.

And, finally, is Miller's theory of tragedy feasible? Surely there is a fallacy in its logic. A search for dignity cannot have the same stirring power as the use of dignity already achieved to play a great part in a significant universe. A man who possesses nobility is, in Willy's terms, "big"; a man struggling to attain it, no matter how courageous his fight or how justified his desire, will remain little in comparison. His struggles may well be affecting, but they cannot inspire in us the pity, fear, and strange exaltation which are the tragic emotions. Whether or not one wishes to broaden his definition of tragedy to include Miller's plays is a matter for personal critical canons, but I think he should realize that he is extending the traditional interpretation to embrace demonstrably different emotional effects and that, in the basic matter of personal dignity, Willy Loman may have ended where Hamlet unquestionably began.