

PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF THE PLAYS OF ARTHUR MILLER

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The celebrated Pulitzer Prize winner, American playwright, Arthur Miller dramatizes how a social event or society can bring about significant changes in the self-perception of an individual. The loss of identity and the quest for it has been the pervasive theme in contemporary American literature. Miller uses both “realistic form” and “objective correlative” to portray masterpieces by combining extraordinarily forceful theatre with uncanny psychological insights. Arthur Miller’s works can be studied with the intervention of the psychological variables and psychoanalysis of his characters in his plays. The psychodynamics of the soul, its conflicts which are intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature and the subsequent attempt to search for a new identity to deal with it to achieve the emancipation of the soul can be elucidated and a new insight into Arthur Miller’s works can be given. Arthur Miller’s works when studied with the intervention of the psychological variables and psychodynamics of his characters in his plays brings out the different ways and means used by the characters using the Defence Mechanisms as propounded by Freud to deal with their conflicts and achieve emancipation of their souls.

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Asher Miller, an American playwright, was born on October 17, 1915, in Harlem, New York City

Miller’s Death of a Salesman premiered on Broadway on February 10, 1949 at the Morocco Theatre, was a commercial success and was critically acclaimed, winning a Tony Award for Best Author, the New York Drama Circle Critics' Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis is a psychological theory developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Austrian Neurologist Sigmund Freud and others.

Freud proposed three psychosexual stages/ structures of the psyche or personality:

- Id: a selfish, primitive, childish, pleasure-oriented part of the personality with no ability to delay gratification.
- Superego: internalized societal and parental standards of "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong" behaviour.
- Ego: the moderator between the id and superego which seeks compromises to pacify both. It can be viewed as our "sense of time and place".

The strategies used to overcome the conflicts related to the above three stages/structures of personality can be dealt through:

- In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, **Defence mechanisms** are unconscious⁴ psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and to maintain self-image.
- George Eman Valliant’s categorization (1977) : Defences form a continuum related to their psychoanalytical developmental level:

Level I - pathological defences (i.e. psychotic denial, delusional projection)

Level II - immature defences (i.e. fantasy, projection, passive aggression, acting out)

Level III - neurotic defences (i.e. intellectualization, reaction formation, dissociation, displacement, repression).

Level IV - mature defences (i.e. humour, sublimation, suppression, altruism, anticipation)

The different themes and characters and their psychoanalysis -

One of the themes of the American dream, the ability to become prosperous, shows the traditional spirit of Americans in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and earlier in "*All my Sons*". Willy Loman in "*Death of a Salesman*" could not follow the change of time and became obsessed with the old values of success dream in the past and Joe a realist, in *All my sons*, got along rather well, even though he too is influenced by old values to some extent. At the time of his birth, Miller's father owned a successful clothing business and the family lived in a Harlem neighborhood. In 1929, the family business failed as a result of the depression and moved to Brooklyn. Miller was a very active child and hardly spent any time reading or studying. He only took an interest in academics in his final year of school, too late to make the grades to be accepted into college. Miller worked various jobs after high school, including one as a salesperson that inspired his later play, *Death of a Salesman*.

Arthur Miller's principal characters are motivated by an obsession to justify themselves. They fix their identities through radical acts of ego-assertion. The conflict between father and son prefigures tragedy's revolutionary question when the child affirms his independence after confronting an intolerant parental authority. Later the mature hero, in life and in art, directs his protest against restrictive forces more potent than the father's for "in truth the parent, powerful as he appears, is not the source of injustice but its deputy".¹ There is no denying that the father-son conflict is an old and also a new theme in Literature. The relationship between father and son in literature takes on a psychological quality just as explained in Freud's "Oedipus Complex".² In *The man who had all the luck* (1944) the theme of father-son conflict is dealt with indirectly. On the other hand, in *All my sons*, he directly dealt with the issue for the first time and as in his biggest hit, *Death of a salesman*, he continued to stick to it in some of his subsequent themes. Examining the confrontation between father-son in *All my sons*, one notices two different notions contradicting each other at a deeper level, the conflict has a complicated structure. Father-son relationships bring past and present together and the hopes and fulfillments are tested. They are a locus of anxieties about identity, of contested values, of an ambivalent love and guilt. In *Death of a salesman* and *The Price*, the brothers have a dialectical relationship to one another. The basis for the dramatic conflict in *Death of a Salesman* lies in Arthur Miller's conflicted relationship with his uncle, Manny Newman, also a salesman. Newman imagined a continuous competition between his son and Miller. Newman refused to accept failure and demanded the appearance of utmost confidence in his household. In his youth, Miller had written a short story about an unsuccessful salesman. His relationship with Manny revived his interest in the abandoned manuscript. He transformed the story into one of the most successful dramas in the history of the American stage. In expressing the emotions that Manny Newman inspired through the fictional character of Willy Loman, Miller managed to touch deep chords within the national psyche.

Arthur Miller employed Expressionism to create a subjective truth and his plays appeared so real as if no one wrote them but they just happened. Miller uses a Character's Schizophrenia to appear to that part deep within our psyche, that makes us see the person on stage as normal as ourselves and we see no split in his personality, like that of Willy Loman, his mind wanders between the Real and the Unreal. Arthur Miller employed Expressionism to create a subjective truth and his plays appeared so real as if no one wrote them but they just happened. This concept and manipulation of time is called Ibsen's Retrospective method. Ibsen says that "it was always much more than a device of exposition; it is a thematic forcing of the past into present"³.

The altered Ego states wrecked havoc in the lives of Arthur Miller's characters as seen in *Death of a Salesman*. Miller brought the psychological consequences of the fanatic self-assertion to the fore. In Miller's

¹ Bigsby CWE (2005). Arthur Miller. A Critical Study. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 158.

² Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, David Lodge (Ed.), Longman, UK, 1989.

³ The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller (Cambridge Companions to Literature), Christopher Bigsby, editor (1998, updated and republished 2010)

Characterization the interaction between the conscious and unconscious elements of the mind is very overtly obvious because the characters are consistently and rigorously subjective though intrigued by interior psychological questions. Throughout his works, Miller repeatedly displays conflict between the individual and other outside forces, be it society, family, or even selfhood. Examples of these types of conflicts are most evident in some of Miller's most famous plays including, *The Crucible*, *Death of a Salesmen*, and *All My Sons*. In *The Crucible* the protagonist, Proctor, faces an inward battle with himself when he must make the decision to give in to what society deems right and lose his good name, or defy it and lose his life. Likewise, in *Death of a Salesmen*, Willy faces conflict with both himself and society when he realizes that he has been blinded to the true values in life by what society deemed "valuable" and then must decide what to do about it. Miller's first successful play, *All My Sons*, also portrays the interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts, when the optimistic son discovers that his father is illegally selling defective plane parts in order to gain more money leaving Chris (the son) undecided on what to do.

Arthur Miller took the historical events of the Salem witch trial and dramatized them in *The Crucible*. In doing so, Miller exposed just how easily and quickly paranoia can spread through a society and to what lengths people will go to protect the values and the institutions that they consider to be sacred and when it is permitted to grow unchecked it devastates both individual and society

Willy Loman

Willy's desperate dwelling in the past and denying the present does not help him achieve the self-realization or self-knowledge typical of the tragic hero. While he achieves a professional understanding of himself and the fundamental nature of the sales profession, Willy fails to realize his personal failure and betrayal of his soul and family through the meticulously constructed artifice of his life. He cannot grasp the true personal, emotional, spiritual understanding of himself as a literal "loman" or "low man." Willy is too driven by his own "willy"-ness or perverse "willfulness" to recognize the slanted reality that his desperate mind has forged. Still, many critics, focusing on Willy's entrenchment in a quagmire of lies, delusions, and self-deceptions, an attempt to ignore the significant accomplishment of his partial self-realization. Willy's failure to recognize the anguished love offered to him by his family is crucial to the climax of his torturous day, and the play presents this incapacity as the real tragedy. Despite this failure, Willy makes the most extreme sacrifice in his attempt to leave an inheritance that will allow Biff to fulfill the American Dream, which is his Obsession.

Biff Loman

Unlike Willy and Happy, Biff feels compelled to seek the truth about himself. While his father and brother are unable to accept the miserable reality of their respective lives, Biff acknowledges his failure and eventually manages to confront it. Even the difference between his name and theirs reflects this polarity: whereas Willy and Happy willfully and happily delude themselves, Biff bristles stiffly at self-deception. Biff's discovery that Willy has a mistress strips him of his faith in Willy and Willy's ambitions for him. Consequently, Willy sees Biff as an underachiever, while Biff sees himself as trapped in Willy's grandiose fantasies. After his epiphany in Bill Oliver's office, Biff determines to break through the lies surrounding the Loman family in order to come to realistic terms with his own life. Intent on revealing the simple and humble truth behind Willy's fantasy, Biff longs for the territory (the symbolically free West) obscured by his father's blind faith in a skewed, materialist version of the American Dream. Biff's identity crisis is a function of his and his father's delusion, which, in order to reclaim his identity, he must expose. Biff is the Freud's Ego state personified.

Happy Loman

Happy shares none of the poetry that erupts from Biff and that is buried in Willy—he is the stunted incarnation of Willy's worst traits and the embodiment of the lie of the happy American Dream. As such, Happy is a difficult character with whom it is difficult to empathize. He is one-dimensional and static throughout the play. His empty vow to avenge Willy's death by finally "beat[ing] this racket" provides evidence of his critical condition: for Happy, who has lived in the shadow of the inflated expectations of his brother, there is no escape from the Dream's indoctrinated lies. Happy's diseased condition is irreparable—he lacks even the tiniest spark of self-knowledge or capacity for self-analysis. He does share Willy's capacity for self-delusion, trumpeting himself as the assistant buyer at his store, when, in reality, he is only an assistant to the assistant buyer. He does not possess a hint of the latent thirst for knowledge that proves Biff's salvation. Happy is a doomed, utterly duped figure, destined to be swallowed up by the force of blind ambition that fuels his insatiable sex drive. Happy is Freud's Id personified.

Linda Loman

Linda serves as a force of reason throughout the play. Linda is probably the most enigmatic and complex character in *Death of a Salesman*, or even in all of Miller's work. Linda views freedom as an escape from debt, the reward of total ownership of the material goods that symbolize success and stability. Willy's prolonged obsession with the American Dream seems, over the long years of his marriage, to have left Linda internally conflicted. Nevertheless, Linda, by far the toughest, most realistic, and most levelheaded character in the play, appears to have kept her emotional life intact. As such, she represents the emotional core of the drama.

Linda is a sort of emotional prophet who overcomes the inevitable end that she foresees with startling clarity. Linda is the voice of rational reason with mature defense mechanisms like suppression, altruism and anticipation.

Joe Keller: All my Sons

Joe seems like the traditional, amiable 1940s father figure. Throughout the play, Joe presents himself as a man who deeply loves his family, but also has great pride in his business. Joe Keller has been running a successful factory for decades. During World War II, his business partner and neighbor, Steve Deever noticed the faulty parts first. Joe decided to send the parts through because he was afraid that admitting the company's mistake would destroy his business and his family's financial stability. By the play's end, the audience discovers the dark secret he has been concealing: Joe allowed the sale of faulty airplane parts to be shipped to the frontline, resulting in the death of twenty-one pilots. After the cause of the deaths was discovered, both Steve and Joe were arrested. Claiming his innocence, Joe was exonerated and released and the entire blame shifts to Steve who remains in jail. Like many other characters within the play, Joe is capable of living in denial. It is not until the play's conclusion that he ultimately faces his own guilty conscience - and then he chooses to destroy himself rather than deal with the consequences of his actions.

John Proctor

In a sense, *The Crucible* has the structure of a classical tragedy, with John Proctor as the play's tragic hero. Honest, upright, and blunt-spoken, Proctor is a good man, but one with a secret, fatal flaw. His lust for Abigail Williams led to their affair (which occurs before the play begins), and created Abigail's jealousy of his wife, Elizabeth, which sets the entire witch hysteria in motion. Once the trials begin, Proctor realizes that he can stop Abigail's rampage through Salem but only if he confesses to his adultery. Such an admission would ruin his good name, and Proctor is, above all, a proud man who places great emphasis on his reputation. He eventually makes an attempt, through Mary Warren's testimony, to name Abigail as a fraud without revealing the crucial information. When this attempt fails, he finally bursts out with a confession, calling Abigail a "whore" and proclaiming his guilt publicly. Only then does he realize that it is too late, that matters have gone too far, and that not even the truth can break the powerful frenzy that he has allowed Abigail to whip up. Proctor's confession succeeds only in leading to *his* arrest and conviction as a witch, and though he lambastes the court and its proceedings, he is also aware of his terrible role in allowing this fervor to grow unchecked.

His immense pride and fear of public opinion compelled him to withhold his adultery from the court, but by the end of the play he is more concerned with his personal integrity than his public reputation. He still wants to save his name, for personal and religious reasons, rather than public reasons. Proctor's refusal to provide a false confession is a true religious and personal stand. Such a confession would dishonor his fellow prisoners, who are brave enough to die as testimony to the truth. Perhaps more relevantly, a false admission would also dishonor him, staining not just his public reputation, but also his soul. By refusing to give up his personal integrity Proctor implicitly proclaims his conviction that such integrity will bring him to heaven. He goes to the gallows redeemed for his earlier sins. Proctor's ultimate confession and his decision to redeem himself and face the gallows shows the moral stand which reflects Freud's Superego state.

DISSENSION IN THE PLOTS OF ARTHUR MILLER

Play	Theme	Psychoanalysis
<i>The Crucible</i>	Widespread devastation, strife	Paranoia, Delusional Projection
<i>Death of a Salesman</i> <i>All My Sons</i>	American dream ,Search for Identity.	Obsession , Psychotic Denial
<i>The Man Who Had All The Luck</i> <i>All My Sons</i> <i>Death of a Salesman</i>	Father Son Conflict	Freud’s Superego Critical
<i>The Crucible</i> <i>All My Sons</i> <i>Death of a Salesman</i>	Intra and Inter Personal Conflicts	Neurotic followed by Anxiety Defence Mechanisms ,

CONCLUSION

EMANCIPATION OF THE SOUL IN ARTHUR MILLER’S WORK

Miller, who is a Humanitarian at heart, has carved his way to the vortex of violence and injustice pervading contemporary society. Miller vivisepts the figures of his characters, and sees through the pseudo-serious mask with which he hoodwinks the members of his society. There is an innate urge to violate social justice in some of the characters of his plays. Miller’s play dramatizes how a social event or society can bring about significant changes in the self-perception of an individual. The loss of identity and the quest for it has been the pervasive theme in contemporary American literature. Miller uses both “realistic” form and “objective correlative” to portray masterpieces by combining extraordinarily forceful theatre with uncanny psychological insights.

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The psychoanalysis of the soul, its conflicts which are intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature and the subsequent attempt to search for a new identity to deal with it and to achieve the emancipation of the soul can be elucidated and a new insight into Arthur Miller’s works can be given.

ANALYSIS:

Documented evidences were used through ‘Library Research Method & Content Analysis:

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