

Biographical Information of Tennessee Williams

The three "giant" voices that emerged in the canon of American dramatists in the first half of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, had several common goals. With O'Neill in the vanguard, each pushed to change American drama into a forum of serious purpose. Each sought innovative ways to externalize the emotional and psychological context of human consciousness, to capture the internal turmoil of "ordinary" individuals struggling to cope with thwarted dreams and life's tribulations. But each had qualities that set one apart from another. Arthur Miller would share the goals, but Miller would be distinctly Miller.

Arthur Miller was born in New York City in 1915 into a family of Jewish immigrants. His father had built a successful garment-making business, but on the threshold of the Great Depression, his business on the verge of collapse, he was forced to move his family from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Building on the argument that creative imagination is forged by life experiences and that the distinctive qualities of an artist come largely from biographical roots, Miller's "fingerprint" as a dramatist seems to have been forcibly shaped by historical events of the 30s, 40s, and 50s. He would experience first hand the dislocation and hardships of the Great Depression. He would witness the impact of World War II. He would be drawn deeply into the political climate of the aftermath.

Miller attended Public School #24 in Harlem in his early years, the school his mother had attended. He graduated from Brooklyn's Abraham Lincoln Public High School, and enrolled briefly in City College night school, but dropped out to take on a series of odd jobs to help his family financially and to save money for college. As a child of the Depression era, Miller's memories were filled with the desperation of his family's financial woes, his father's heartbreak at the loss of his business, the suicide of his salesman uncle, and the images of a country ravaged by upheaval and hunger.

Miller entered the University of Michigan in 1934 with the intent to major in journalism. During his first two years, he worked as a reporter and night editor of the University's newspaper. His savings helped pay for the first year, but to stay on, he worked part-time jobs around campus. In 1936, after winning his first of three Avery Hopwood Awards, the University's prestigious recognition for outstanding achievement in writing, he switched to an English major. In 1938, he turned down an offer to write Hollywood scripts to join the Federal Theater Project, a short-lived experience because the Project closed down. In 1941, he took on an extra job working as a shipfitting helper at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, meanwhile writing radio plays, an adventure that lasted through 1946. In 1956, a victim of the McCarthy "witch hunts," Miller was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee to testify about his involvement with the Communist Party. When he refused to name names of those whom he knew had been associated with the Party, he was convicted of Contempt of Congress, a charge overturned by the United States Court of Appeals in 1958.

The narratives and expositions, the diction, images and tone quality of Miller's plays—*All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A View from the Bridge*, *An Incident at Vichy*, *The Crucible*, as examples—resonate Miller's past in the above environments. They ring with the integrity that spins out from knowing first hand what it means to scratch out a living when things go downhill financially, to work long hours for low pay at such tedious jobs as driving trucks, manning assembly lines, and loading cargo on the Brooklyn waterfront, and to be a victim of anti-Semitism and the scorching indictment of out-of-control authority. Miller's characters do not speak in O'Neill type mist/fog images of the sea or the shadows/ghosts of a mystical "other" that reflect O'Neill's past experiences. Nor do they speak in the subjective poetic sensibility of a Tom Wingfield or the sensuous tones and evocative rhythms of Southern dialect, extensions of Williams' Southern background. The language of Miller's characters is weighted with Ibsen-like images of the "actual": Frigidaires, old Chevies, fountain pens, garden tools, motorcycles, Brooklyn flats, the "granite" images of New England. It is spare, plain, disciplined.

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* moves in and out of time, creating a compelling fusion of past and present. *The Crucible* is a symbolic representation rich in allegorical overtones. But within the extensions of the nonreal of memory and the eloquence of a morality play, the language is simple, direct; the settings unadorned. The mystical-like memory of Willy Loman comes through a wall talking about football and polishing the car, an hysterical young girl "sees" the supernatural but one is kept very aware that the "seeing" is on the ceiling in a wooden-framed court room, Linda Loman speaks in beautiful poetic cadence at Willy's grave but talks about house payments. Strong actuality and a strong current of objectivity prevail in Miller's work.

The narratives and expositions, the forceful "realism" of language Miller uses in peopling his plays are distinguishing agents of his creativity, but the most distinctive mark of Miller as a dramatist—again, resonating his life's experiences—comes through a recurring theme he launches in his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man." Within the context of asserting that "common man is as apt a subject for tragedy" as were kings, Miller defines tragedy as built on "the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly," driven to make honest assessment of his capabilities and weaknesses, his capacity for good and for evil, especially when suffering a "wound of indignity." Miller maintains that a dramatist must recognize this need of man "to wholly realize himself." Such a need for "self-realization" is an individual's only "fixed star." He elaborates with a statement that, if an individual is destroyed in the attempt to achieve "self-realization," such destruction "posits a wrong or evil in his environment, a condition which suppresses man."

From this philosophical base, Miller builds an argument that is echoed throughout his essays and is the heartbeat of his plays. To develop exalted drama, he asserts, a dramatist must set up a "balanced concept of life." "Man is not a "private entity." He operates within a societal framework that has "the power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not. Society is inside of man and man is inside society. The fish is in the water and the water is inside the fish." In this argument, Miller takes aim at the "turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological" as a demonstration of "lack of balance."

Miller's concern with "balance" especially differentiates his particular genius. In subtle and not so subtle ways, Miller's themes grow out of dramatic tensions generated when an individual, encased within a societal framework with which he is in conflict, is evoked into "self-realization" or does not achieve it. The societal framework in which Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman*, is embedded has implanted in Willy's consciousness the "fixed star" of the American Dream – power, money, "winning in the market place." He builds illusions about himself and of his sons from that societal vision. His inner consciousness increasingly confronts the reality of his situation, but the firm grip of the societal Dream still holds. He kills himself thinking insurance will help his sons secure that "fixed star." Out of the narrative base and the tensions within the "balanced" view of inner–outer forces, Miller hurls a thematic indictment. "Willy had the wrong dream." The societal framework has "posit [ed] a wrong."

John Proctor's inner conflict in *The Crucible* is framed within the context of a Puritan society that, driven by fear, tries to hold its iron grip in the face of the new "loosening" that is occurring as the once tight "city on a hill" begins to expand. Proctor fights the guilt within himself, deeply aware of his capacity to do wrong. He takes a stand against the monomania of the societal force to achieve the "self-realization" of making what his conscience tells him is a rightful decision. Given the option of life or death, he chooses death rather than violate his conscience and dishonor his name. Through the narrative base and tensions of inner–outer forces, Miller makes a searing indictment of the tyranny of a society that has lost its moral compass. The societal framework has "posit [ed] a wrong."

Miller fuses the psychological/sociological probe of the individual's responsibility to society and the

society's responsibility to an individual with exquisite structural timing and in forceful, "muscular" prose. Out of this inner-outer, subjective-objective calibration emerges Miller's concept of "heroic" stature: the willingness of man "to throw all he has in the contest... to lay down his life, if need be, to secure ...his personal dignity...to gain his 'rightful' place in the world."

Miller's protagonists struggle within themselves to understand what has gotten in the way of gaining a "rightful place." They confront the questions of blame, of moral certitude as they painfully scour their inner selves and outside forces for the answers to what "hedges" and "lowers" them, denying them "selfrealization."

Miller plays out this "inner" and "outer" search, the reach to find a moral center, with detachment and dichroic hue. His characters are not isolated into themselves, psychologically entrenched in their own neurosis. They pursue answers and solutions with strong will, even when it means selfindictment and self-destruction. They take on a situation and, if they lose, they do so on their own terms.

Arthur Miller's plays are plays of serious moral purpose. In the deep probes of "justly evaluating," his characters ask hard questions of themselves and the society that surrounds them, the kind of questions that desperately need to be asked in this age of heightened chaos and uncertainty. What is the problem? Why is this happening? Wherein lies the wrong? And, perhaps the hardest question of all, one leaving Miller's audiences pondering long after the curtain drops: What is the solution? Running throughout Miller's searching dramas, however, is Miller's deeply felt affirmation of the "heroic." Through strength of will, unfaltering determination to find a moral center, modern man can find answers.

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