

RESEARCH ARTICLE

American Success Myth and Human Relations in Arthur Miller's *The Price*

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Abstract

The theatrical world that Miller conceives is entirely social and his dramatis personae belonging to different social set-ups with their own individuality are without a single exception, common people with average figure and stature. Miller sees individual and society as belonging to two opposite camps and that every individual as influenced by his milieu and up bringing is involved in some sort of transgressions and these transgressions directly threaten the healthy structure of society and hence unacceptable to it. The lure of wealth and material success characterized the American society after the IInd world war and Miller repeatedly highlights the pitfalls of American society reeling under gross materialism that has swallowed the warmth among the humanity. The present study focusing on Miller's play *The Price* suggests how a homogeneity can be developed with regard to acrimony between material success and depletion of human relations.

Key words: Human Relations, Success Myth, Society, Man, Culture

Arthur Miller was a keen observer of human affairs and his different plays though seem different in setting and thematic analysis, but the core issue always was to present man as he is – inward as well as outward. And he clearly exposed before the audience the gulf that separated these two halves of man – well separated by his deeds – good and bad. While for the former, he had to labour hard, the latter – bad or evil – came naturally to him and the man always felt a strong pull towards evil which led him to betrayals or violations of conscience. His liking for these transgressions made his position pathetic as well as tragic. How the desire for wealth ruled the lives of the dramatis personae in *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Price*. Miller here deals with the themes of love and betrayal, success and survival. The playwright is concerned with love and loyalty and the corresponding socio-economic pressures which compel a man to pursue success at the cost of the human values in a bid to survive wealth-amassing spree. The play is not concerned with these human values in a superficial way, nor in the intellectual manner of a play of ideas. The conflict between two brothers is the soul of the tragedy, and family is the locus of action where two individuals act differently. The question involved is who acts wisely and whose decision is the right decision. The answer to this question is,

however, not as simple as it appears; it involves an examination of their entire background and circumstances. Not only that, it also involves a search of their hearts and this whole process, consisting of their viewpoints, constitutes the backbone of the play. The main action consists of an open confrontation between the two brothers, Victor Franz and Walter Franz, who have been estranged for sixteen years. The basic question involved is one of choices which the brothers Victor and Walter make at a crucial stage when their father goes bankrupt. Victor decides to stay with father and support him while Walter decides to walk away in order to brighten his own prospects of success. Now when they have lived according to their choices, they are made to examine the quality of life each has lived and the price each has had to pay for it. The whole process reveals the anguish of their hearts as the tragic feeling is evoked through the enactment of the whole process and the accompanying irony that it cannot be reversed.

The Price remains the most important theatrical work of Miller after *All My Sons* where shock waves of the Depression were still felt. It affirms that the crash had an unforgettable imprint in the mind of the playwright. This play a traditional piece of drama, presents in a sublime manner what price one pays for the choices made in life. The protagonists of the play Victor and Walter shocked by the failure of love and bewildered by the treachery and cruelty of human relationships, retreats into illusions, a common characteristic of Miller's heroes. Both of them are found trapped into an illusory world and both of them remain unsuccessful to discover or create any meaning. Victor is a frustrated and

disappointed policeman who lacks the courage to go for retirement because this will prove him a failure which he does not want to become; rather he rues over his past sacrifices regarding his career making when he had to take care of his father while Walter, a true professional, avoids family responsibilities, and becomes a successful surgeon. Victor tries to see meaning in his sacrifices where marriage also breaks up with Esther as the latter is embittered by the failure of her husband. After the death of their father Victor and Walter, two brothers meet to evaluate their father's belongings. Both of them have different ends of the spectrum Victor is a poorly paid policeman at the brink of retirement while Walter is a successful surgeon. Both resent each other for separate reasons – one for his family attachments, the other for his financial achievements. A confrontation arises between the two brothers and each has to take a decision whether or not to accept or give up his past errors or achievements. Man, caught in this kind of a trap of success myth, as if in a pit, struggles to escape, but having gone too far in life, no escape is possible, however, in this battle he achieves a measure of dignity. C.W.E. Bigsby writes about Miller's protagonists: "... we are invited to witness the struggles of a man who has 'the wrong dreams', and who embraces too completely the ethics of a society intent on success at any price." (Bigsby, 1984 ,220) When the play opens we find Victor tormented by the prospect of his impending retirement. He is not only afraid of the emptiness that lies ahead but also frustrated with the kind of life he has lived so far: "I look at my life and the whole thing is incomprehensible to me. I know all the reasons and all the reasons and all the reasons, and it ends up-nothing." (Miller, 1985, 23) He finds himself at cross roads because

he knows everything, but he can do nothing about it. He is evidently disillusioned with his life as he broods over that after his twenty eight years of his service in the police department, his life seems to have been a pure waste. The irony is that "he could never stand the sight of blood. He was shy, he was sensitive..." (Miller, 1985, 90) Victor in *The Price* admits: "... I'm not even sure any more what I was trying to accomplish. I look back now, and all I can see is a long, brain-less walk in the street." (Miller, 1985, 48)

Money or success remains certainly the most crucial operating metaphor throughout the works of Miller. It gives his plays a rich texture of meaning by suggesting the role that forces of success myth play in the lives of individuals. The entire frame of reference of the Great Depression, however obsolete it might appear in a play written in the late sixties, is intended to provide the socio-economic background that plays a vital part in the play. The depression is not just an isolated phenomenon that belonged to the thirties, rather it continued to play its part in the subconscious mind, throughout the decades after the Crash. It is, on the contrary, symbolic of the economic forces and the crucial part they play in the drama of human lives. Miller in his plays explores the ramifications of the theme of human integrity in a society governed by considerations of money-success. The economic forces have shaken up man's faith in essential goodness of heart and soul and the pursuit of success becomes an unending mirage for Miller's men because the prevalent system acknowledged the presence of only those who were wealthy and rich, and in trying to be so, the inherent integrity, goodness and truth in human heart was defiled. In *The Price* Walter, being a selfish, money-hungry physician, not only

deserts his father but also later refuses to lend Victor the money he needs to go to college. In this way both brothers feel as if they have no warmth or love for each other, both revel in their own worlds. Matthew J. Bruccoli comments on Miller's own idea regarding the choices made in life: "... the choice made by the conscience may be wrong, but Miller applauds the man who has the courage to make the choice. In his personal life as well as in his writings, Miller never wavered from this belief." (Bruccoli, 380)

The play is a sharp commentary on how man gives the foremost importance to his self, ignoring the other sacrifices required by the social or familial bonding. Walter leaves his family behind and as a representative of materialistic world, goes on to become a very successful person but not satisfied so far as the mental piece is concerned. Victor has decided to sell his deceased father's furniture from the attic of a condemned brownstone. The title of the play refers, first of all, to the price Victor can get for the furniture from a secondhand furniture dealer Gregory Solomon who is a wise man of almost ninety years of age. Victor is an idealist – who is frustrated and bitterly disappointed in his life. When he looks back over his life, he sees no meaning and no hope for his remaining years. He lacks the courage to retire because this means he will be obliged to own his failure to create anything worthwhile through his career. Likewise he lacks the will to start again to change his fate. Walter, despite being a successful surgeon who has made money by sacrificing his vocation to simple greed finds no purpose or meaning behind his frenzied pursuit of wealth and fame. His personal life is in ruins; his professional integrity compromised. But after a serious nervous

breakdown, he feels at long last that he has begun to understand his own self, and thus is resolute to put this new, imperfect knowledge into practice. For the first time, he feels genuinely alive to the possibilities of a life built on something more substantial than mutual recrimination and obsessive guilt. Seized with a naïve excitement, he struggles against his old nature and fights to explain his new perception to his brother. What he now understands and tries to convey to his brother is that human failure can be traced not to the destructiveness of a particular social system but to the failure of individuals to recognize the paramount importance of some kind of genuine human relationship. Earlier, Victor's father, like Miller's own father, went bankrupt in the Depression which caused the family to split. Victor chose to stay with his father rather than pursue his own dreams. He, like a noble son, sacrificed his career – he was always good in science and his father simply watched his son unnecessarily sacrificing his future for him. His mother blamed father for spoiling her musical career, while his brother Walter went on to become a successful surgeon. Victor's self-sacrifice also becomes a factor in the split of his own family. His wife Esther is embittered by his failure and contemptuous of his weakness. Rather than facing the reality of her position, she resorts to alcohol. Thus, shocked by the failure of love and bewildered by the treachery and cruelty of family relationships, these protagonists retreat into illusion. Trapped in this illusory world, none of them have been able to discover or create any meaning.

Walter and Esther are very truthfully portrayed as alienated figures who in their lives at one point of time or the other, find

themselves looking at the barrel regarding their perversions or their role in fracturing human relations which gradually force them to go into their own world of abstractions. Bigsby observes how isolation causes destruction to Miller's protagonists: "... the essence of Miller's drama is that private and public are finally inseparable. It is the basis of his social critique-his sense that a world of self-regarding, self-seeking isolatos must finally also be self-destruction." (Bigsby, 2000, 48) Walter, finally comes to feel that only when the individual is prepared to confront reality and cease defending himself by indicting others, he really takes his destiny into his own hands. In his own words: "I don't look high and low for some betrayal any more; my days belong to me now, I'm not afraid to risk believing someone..." (Miller, 1985, 109-110) The two brothers in the play represent different approaches to life – approaches which not only coexist in the world but which constitute the basis of most individual lives. This is the significance of Walter's remark: "We're brothers. It was only two seemingly different roads out of the same trap. It's almost as though... We're like two halves of the same guy. As though we can't quite move ahead-alone." (Miller, 1985, 110) The qualities of the two brothers are vaguely delineated as at first sight it appears to be simply a contrast between heroic self-sacrifice and callous self-interest. But below this public face is some naked truth; Victor is revealed as a weak and irresolute individual, unwilling to concede responsibility for his own life and consciously avoiding painful facts by retreating into illusion. Walter, on the other hand, is a man who, like Biff, has gradually come to understand the futility of wealth and success and who now tries to pass on his insight to others. He

recognizes the need to acknowledge the reality of human weakness and to accept responsibility for one's own actions.

The Price takes us back to from where dramatist's journey began in 1940's when his mind was still in the grip of American capitalism and the effects of IInd world war. Here again we witness the family saga of the rival brothers, as in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* have been presented. Miller here brings the two brothers – one a policeman who is at the brink of retirement, the other a surgeon who is a selfish, money hungry surgeon - to the attic of a condemned brownstone. There, the brothers, surrounded by the furniture which belonged to their deceased father, try to face the mutual accusation that has dogged them for the last sixteen years during which they have not seen or talked to each other. Victor, the policeman, blames Walter, the surgeon for not having lent him enough money to finish college and for having left him to care for the father, while Walter accuses Victor of knowing that father was not that helpless, at least, financially, and of choosing his policeman's fate to keep Walter guilty. Morris Freedman points out that both the brothers "were in conflict with their father while he was alive, in different ways, and remain after his death in some significant conflict with one another". (Freedman, 55) Walter appears a selfish person who not only deserted his father but also later refused to lend Victor the money the latter needed to go to college. When these brothers meet for the sale of the furniture, they continue their confrontation as old. Walter is appalled at the low price that Victor has accepted for the

furniture and offers a devious scheme for making a great deal of money out of it. Instead of selling the furniture, Walter will have Solomon, a wise old furniture dealer, over appraise it outrageously and then give it to charity. By this he would be able to gain a huge profit in the form of a tax refund. When Walter offers to give the whole amount to Victor, it seems, he is trying to rectify the mistake he committed earlier by not helping victor and in this way he wants to satisfy himself about his guilt. This act of Walter is his admission of his guilt. Murphy Horner writes about *The Price*:

With all the dramatic examples of tumult and war and deprivation, Miller chose something much simpler. He took simple familiar family relationships and used it for the backdrop of his ideas. Victor and Walter are not utterly indistinguishable from the crowd, their family had drama. But given the times everyone had lived through, their drama was not extraordinary... Men in middle age taking stock and facing life-long illusions, they speak intensely and finally, with honesty,

about their
motivations. (Horner)

Walter, the other brother who has apparently been a success in the materialistic term, has also paid a heavy price for his success by way of a divorce and a nervous breakdown. He seems to have realised how fruitless and meaningless his whole material success has been. When Esther questions him that he is a different person, Walter replies : "I think I am, Esther, I live differently, I think differently" (Miller, 1985, 81) He owned three nursing homes but he "pulled out of the market," (Miller, 1985, 82) and half of his time is now spent in city hospitals. He now feels alive for the first time after having given up the chase for material success and money-making but it has all been at the cost of his own health and domestic happiness. There is another price implied in the title of the play: a promising scientist in youth, Victor sacrificed his career to stay with his father after the crash, taking whatever menial work he could find to maintain his old man's dignity. Walter's success as a doctor and entrepreneur combines explosively with his apparent contempt for Victor's failure. Thus, the feeling of getting success, a form of American success-myth, once again becomes the dominant factor of loss, the irretrievable loss, which is one of the most essential features of this play. The title *The Price* is just another variation on the success-myth because it is not only the price of the old furniture that is in question but also the price of one's successful career, one's happiness, and above all, one's integrity, Morris Freedman defining 'price' says:

Repeated variations are
rung on the concept of

price. What price does one pay for a happy marriage? For a successful career? To fulfill ambition? For breaking-off family ties? For filial sacrifice? ... Nothing is bought, nothing is bargained for, nothing is received without an appropriate payment. (Freedman, 57)

Walter tells this to Victor: "You wanted a real life. And that's an expensive thing; it costs." (Miller, 1985, 83) Victor had to pay a heavy price in terms of his career and ambition for the sake of his loyalty but he knows the power that money has. He says to Solomon, the furniture dealer, that "there's just no respect for anything but money." (Miller, 1985, 48) Years ago, when he was supporting his father, his brother Walter, who was then a successful surgeon, used to contribute a meager sum of five dollars a month. Demanding a heavy price for the furniture, Victor says to Solomon, "If you got that (money) you got it all. You're even lovable." (Miller, 1985, 48) Esther, Victor's wife, also knows the power of money when she says, "I want it, Vic? I want money!" (Miller, 1985, 19) Walter's life-pattern, on the other hand, is different; he deserts his parents, his brother, his friends, and even his wife for the sake of money. He worked like a money-maniac, evading taxes, cultivating rich patients and building up a rich empire with his three nursing homes. But he has known the terror and "the daily fear you call ambition" associated with "piling up the money." (Miller, 1985, 62) He realized only

after his health broke down that money had made him a monster and, one night, he says, "I found myself in the middle of my living room, dead drunk with a knife in my hand, getting ready to kill my wife."(Miller, 1985, 62) He confesses to Victor: "Vic, we were both running from the same thing. I thought I wanted to be tops, but what it was untouchable. I ended in a swamp success and bank books..."(Miller, 1985, 84) The confrontation between two brothers in the play is a conflict of opposing moralities.

To conclude, Miller's characters have a great liking for their 'self', more so for their private 'self', but still they are not without their sense of familial and social obligations. Thinking of 'self' and trying to extend their perverted 'self', before their family or the society, they at times flout the checks imposed on them by familial or social forces. His character – Joe, Willy, Proctor, Eddie, Quentin, Walter and Victor – fail to understand that there can be no separate 'self', but only one which is personified in the family or society. Actions of an individual always overlap and thus they will have bearing upon their own family as well as society of which they are but only smaller units. The human beings have imperfections in themselves which arrest their growing 'self'. C.W.E. Bigsby's remark is very apt about Miller's personae: "From the beginning of his career, Arthur Miller has seen the individual being as deeply flawed but capable of resisting the fact of imperfection." (Bigsby, 1984, 243) And this is the main cause of the discordance in relations between man and the world around. Avtar Singh's comments unhinge the truth regarding man's relationship with family and society: "If Arthur Miller's conclusion in despair offers any kind of compromise, it lies in his division of the blame

between man himself and society. The rules imposed are not altogether the product of men in their time; they are the result of an evolutionary process begun before their period." (Singh, 238) Miller was a great supporter of human values and as an optimist, he firmly believes that we can conceive a world devoid of evil and betrayals if we are honest to ourselves as well as to the world around. Steven R. Centola stressing on human values says: "The greatness of humanity lies in its ability to forge meaning out of chaos. The human mind, Miller believes, shapes, defines, clarifies, orders, and gives purpose and meaning to life and human experience." (Centola)

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