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Intra Societal Conflict in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract:

“Death of a Salesman” which establishes Miller as a leading contemporary dramatist, presents the image of American industrial society distorted by the agonizing aftermath of the Great Depression. It is a bitter complaint of the moral and social standards of contemporary America, not merely a record of the particular plight of one man. And also obviously, it presents Willy Loman, the main protagonist of the play as a victim of the deterioration of the ‘American dream’. The word ‘dream’ is a key word, recurring frequently in the play; and the deterioration of American individualism is traced through the Loman generation in a descending scale, from the whiteman – like exuberance of Willy’s father, through Ben, Willy himself, to the empty predatoriness of Happy, who is, he admits, compulsively competitive in sex and business for no reason. Robert Hogan observes: “The play is a notable achievement, for in it playwright broke out of the realistic confinement of time and space and psychology.”¹ Illuminating one another the past and present move forward together in the play. And it brings into a sharp focus the American Myth of success, American morality, family structure, sex relations and commercial relations.

1. Introduction

Willy Loman’s faithfulness to the great American dream of success is at the very heart of the conflict in the drama. His philosophy is the personality cult of Dale Carnegie, to ‘win friends and influence people’, ‘theory which exploits human relations for purpose of gain. He tells his son Ben: “... the wonder of this country is that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being like”. And his famous distinction between being ‘liked’ and being ‘well liked’ seems to rest on whether or not the liking can be exploited for practical ends. He shares his culture’s conviction that personality is matter of mannerism and in the sharing he develops a style that compounded of falseness.

The life story of Willy Loman presents the story of the failure of the success myth. The events of the play symbolize the collapse of the myth of the dream of success. His life seems to be a patchwork of errors of judgement, mental and moral lapses and misdirected hopes. But perhaps his greatest mistake is living far too long with the wrong dreams. In many instances in the play Willy verbalizes this dream in the advice he gives to his sons in the initial flashback he compares them with bookish Bernard.

Willy: Bernard is not well liked, is he?

Biff: He’s liked, but he’s not well liked.

Happy: That’s right, Pop.

Willy: That’s just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, u’ Understand, but when he gets out in the business world, u’ understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be like me and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. “Willy Loman is here. That’s all they have to know, and I go right through.”²

This is the dream of success, Willy believes, to which he has dedicated his life and the lives of his sons. Despite that it is wrong for him; he clings to it that he can ultimately maintain only at the price of his identity. At the end it occurs, he sacrifices himself and his sons to his deceptive and demanding goodness.

The play Miller created is not simply the story of a salesman who commits suicide in order to give his family the money from a life insurance policy. On one level, the work explores the nature of the American family, with the father as the power figure, provider, and example setter. On another level, the play shows the toll that business takes on a person in America and the lack of gratitude given to people who devote their lives to serve in a company. On still another level, ‘Death of a Salesman’ questions the value of success.

Willy’s misfortune is one of the poignant and inevitable misfortunes of American society of the post World-War II. The various theories of the ideas of success whether created by Horatio Alger, Herbert Spencer or Dale Carnegie, have contributed to the state of

mind that regards failures as a crime. Success is a requirement that Americans insist upon, it is to be considered the due of every free citizen, even those with no special talents. One citizen is as good as any other, and every citizen is entitled to success just as he is entitled to his fundamental civil rights. A citizen may rightly and perhaps logically ask: If Edison, Goodrich ... can make it, why not me, why not Willy Loman? In effect, this is the question Willy asks his brother, Ben. There is no answer to the question, and the consequent disappointment that Willy feels is one of the great American exasperations. He postpones his anguish by transferring his ambitions to his sons, and so the play's free use of time permits us to observe ambition and failure in both generations.

Willy's language reflects his resoluteness in the pursuit of success. It is devoid of words for anything but the necessities of life and the ingredients or symbols of success. The world is full of aspirin, arch support, saccharin, stude-bakers, Chevrolets, shaving lotion, refrigerators, silk stockings, and washing machines. Everything except such commonplace objects is washed out of the character's speeches. In moments of excitement they do not rise above "knock him dead, boy", or "I'm gonna to knock Howard for loop" or "knock 'em dead". In other words, the real fabric of language is here woven of the most ordinary stuff. Some dubious rhetoric is permitted on the two occasions when it is necessary to point a moral. This function is usually Linda's, but at Willy's funeral it is shared by Charley who speaks a eulogy not for Willy but for his profession. "No body does blame this man. A salesman is got to dream boy, it comes with the territory." Buried under platitudes, Willy has allowed no more individually in death than he has shown in life.

John Beaufort, the critic for the 'Christian Science Monitor' attacked Willy Loman as a sad character, a vicious character. Therefore, when Philip Gelb, as an interviewer, seeks Miller's reaction to Beaufort's statement, Miller replies, "The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has values."³ But only a little later, in the same interview, Miller spoke about this play as, "to set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of grip..."⁴ It would seem that Miller here contradicts himself. But Miller is certain that values are involved, and he has tried to hammer out some values, to dramatise them. He seems to say that what Willy believes in, is false, but that it is a system of values nevertheless. Although the values are real to Willy they are so false, that Miller, after asserting that Willy has values goes onto point out that values do not exist. The false dream is fully and vividly sketched; positive values seem rather dim and conventional.

Prominent among the false values is, as already indicated, the idea of personal success in a competitive society. Miller makes the conventional equation between commercial competition and personal context. Brother Ben has one lesson for Willy's son Biff: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You shall never get out of the jungle that way." This view of American society is common enough in criticism from the "left". But instead of saying that property is theft, Miller seems to be saying that competition is theft. Biff is the particular exponent of this view. Imbued by his father with the spirit of competition, he steals a football, a box of basket ball, a suit of cloths, and less deliberately, a fountain pen. This equation between competition and theft afterwards automatically made by a waiter when Happy tells him that he and his brother are going into business together. The comment of the waiter Stanley; "Great! That's the best for you. Because a family business, you know what I mean? That's the best. 'Cause what's the difference? Somebody steals? It's in the family."⁵ This implicit idea of competition, which is built into the acquisitive philosophy of the business society, is echoed in a chance remark made by waiter Stanley, in Act Two has been commented upon many critics. Still the profound train of social criticism in the play seems to validate Stanley's view that business like property is a form of theft. Also, some connection will be formed in the audience's mind between this allusion to stealing and the stealing that Biff does when he tries to make a career in business, a connection which deepens our impression of the callousness of the capitalist system. There is an instance in the play where Miller calls in the study of human society to explain the sexual neurosis of one of the characters. In a conversation in Act One, Happy tells Biff how he seduced fiancée of one of the executives of the firm where he is employed:

' Sure, the guy's in line for the vice presidency of the store, I don't know what gets into me, may be I just have an over developed sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her, and further more I cannot get rid of her. And he is the third executive I've done that to. Isn't that a crummy characteristic? And to top it all, I go to their weddings!... you know how honest I am, but its like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't want that girl, and still I take it and... I love it!⁶

Happy says that he did this out of an "overdeveloped sense of competitions!

It is the world into which that Willy is cast adrift, chasing slowly of material success. A certain amount of his displacement of perspectives is suggested by his desperate concern for his identity, his 'name'. In his climax encounter with Biff, Willy cries out: "I am not dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" (Collected Plays p 217). There is both pride and pain, in this assertion made by a person who, broken by the external world, tries to cling fast to his self image. The tape recorder scene in Act Two where Willy confronts his young employer Howard is a controversial scene.

Several critics have explained their divergent views about the scene. Writing from a Marxist point of view, Eleanor Clarke approaches "Death of a Salesman" as a diluted version of the propaganda plays of the Depression decade. Asserting that it is a capitalist system that has done in Willy, Clarke says that the scene in which Willy is brutally fired after some forty years with the firm, "comes straight from the party line literature of the thirties."⁷ Benjamin Nelson and Dennis Welland, both have marked out the sense differently. Welland points out that Howard is a "nice guy" and his callousness is occasioned less by his business acumen than by his absorption in his personal life. Both critics are of the view that Howard has been sufficiently humanized by Miller not to appear as a capitalist monster. When Clarke forcefully explains her belief that the tape recorder scene contains an indictment of capitalism, Welland opines that the scene is an hysterical breakdown that symbolizes the central theme of the play. Whether the past is that of his own son recorded on his memory and conscience, or that of Howard's son recorded on a mechanical instrument, it's the past, more than

capitalism, of which Willy is always the victim.' Willy serves the company for some forty years and in the end, he is thrown out like a rotten fruit.

To focus attention on objective as well as subjective reality Miller has brought forth the significance of the individual and the inner being of the individual. At first Miller had thought of different title for the play, namely "The Inside of the Head". This title itself indicates that playwright was trying to probe the mind of the individual. In the play the significance of the individual is clearly shown when, Willy's wife Linda says that Willy is not a great man. A little later she adds that 'A small be just as exhausted as a great man'. She pleads that Willy should not be allowed to die like an old dog and that attention must be paid to him. The basic assumption, in Linda's appeal seems that, Willy is after all, an individual human being. Miller's focus of attention on the individual mind reveals what Willy really is? Therefore, theme of the search for identity seems to be one of the dominant strains in the play. Willy is completely obvious of the real sense of identity. He seeks his identity in being "well liked" and in "contacts". That is why he gives this advice to his sons and even tells Ben during a memory sequence that it is these things which matter in the world. Sigleman and Ben are also symbols or the attitudes and aspiration of Willy Loman. Dave Singleman, an elderly salesman whose life and death, Willy always dreams would be his. In Act Two, when Howard Wagner, young industrialist tries to make Willy face the fact that he is being fired because "It's a business... and everybody's gotta to pull his own weight." Willy at tempts to tell the young man of the effect Dave Singleman had made on him as,

.... I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty four years old, and a he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers----I'll never forget and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realised that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more signifying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, in to twenty, or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people ? Do you know? When he died – and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston – When he died, hundreds of salesman's and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on lotta trains for months after that. (he stands up. Howard has not looked at him) In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear--- or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me anymore.⁸

Although he recalls true values in Singleman's life, Willy's mistake with respect to the old salesman is his failure to perceive that Singleman's success was due to his character rather than his vocation. It was a man, not the job, who elicited the respect and love that Willy so desperately desires. Singleman is Willy's idea of success as a salesman, and Ben is Willy's idea of becoming rich through hard and pioneering work. Both combined suggest Willy Loman's idea of materialistic success in society.

Because Willy tries to seek his identity in the things do not constitute the real and complete identity of an individual, his quest for identity is doomed to fail from the very beginning. That is why, in the play we see, there is lingering desire somewhere in the mind of Willy that he needs a little peace of mind. Willy makes, as he thinks, some kind of sacrifice for the future security of his family by committing suicide. However, his death also does not imply Willy's understanding of his identity. Biff repeatedly says in the Requiem about Willy, his father, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong. He never knew who he was... the man didn't know who he was."⁹ The problem here is that there seems a gap between the identity of the individual and the image that society demands of him. This gap is marked in the existence of Willy Loman. Biff holds his father responsible for giving the former the wrong dreams that thereby distorted the latter's image of identity.

To blame the individual of his faults is not necessarily to absolve the society. The play reveals both callousness of society and the exhaustion of Willy. In the very beginning of the play, Willy tells his wife Linda: "I am tired to the death". During the course of hallucination also Willy says to Ben: "I am getting awfully tired, Ben." This is not just exhaustion of a sixty years old man. The society of which he is a part has given him exhaustion and nervous breakdown. Willy is trapped by his own culture. Earlier events of Miller's life, his experience in the Depression years, collapse of the business of his father and grandfather as a result of the Depression, all these compels us to think about Miller that he may be thought to be making an attempt to present the evil of capitalism and suggest socialism as remedy in the play. We remember that during his early days Miller expressed iconoclastic views on the economic order of his country, namely capitalism and that his elders were shocked by his attitude. It may be said that the play shows that conflicts are inherent in the economic structure of the country (capitalism) to which Miller belongs or to which Willy belongs in the play. There are business tycoons like Howard, Charley and Oliver, the flourishing salesman like Dave Singleman and also the failed salesman like Willy. Thus the idea of the big business is involved along with the system of capitalism. Willy's loss of job can be interpreted as the helplessness of a bourgeois, if not a proletarian, and the callous action of the capitalist Howard. In his exasperation Willy cries out, "you can't eat the orange and throw the peels away---a man is not a piece of fruit."¹⁰ This may be interpreted as the capitalistic exploitation of the worker. The capitalistic world, of which Willy is an inseparable part, is the world of competition where you must excel others in 'selling'; here old and tired man Willy does not sell. And Miller in 'Introduction to the Collected Plays' views that Willy Loman has broken a law, without whose protection life is insupportable, the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live.

The play reveals also the inner thoughts of Willy Loman. Miller lays bare the psyche of his protagonist in the play. Miller has himself stated that he has tried to present what happens to a man when he loses his grip on the forces of life. The unveiling of the psyche

during the course of the play shows that Willy has lost his grip on life and ultimately he lets go life itself. Willy's hallucinations and memory sequences clearly point out to this. Miller has himself provided us the psychological cause for this condition of Willy. He remarks that, "the trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideals". The ideals of Willy stand projected in Singleman and Ben. Both these persons, in the play, are already dead and Willy's impending doom is suggested at the very outset of the play. Willy consults Ben during the course of his hallucination, and then commits suicide. In the late night seed planting scene at the end of the play, he is finally aware that he has ignored far too long the call of the open air. Willy pathetically tries to plant seeds by flashlight. He is madly talking to his dead brother:

(He is carrying a flashlight, a hoe and a handful of seed packets. He raps the top of the hoe sharply to fix it firmly, and then moves to the left, measuring off the distance with his foot. He holds the flashlight to look at the seed packets, reading the instructions. He is in the blue of night)

Willy: Carrot...quarter-inch apart. Rows...one-foot rows. He measures it off. One foot. (He puts another package and measures again. Lettuce. (He reads the package, put it down) one foot--- (He breaks off as Ben appears at the right and moves slowly down to him) what a proposition, ts, ts. Terrific, terrific, 'Cause she's suffered, Ben, the woman has suffered. You understand me? A man can not go out the way he came in, Ben; a man has got to add up to something. You can't, you can't ---(Ben moves towards him as though to interrupt) You gotta consider, now. Don't answer so quickly. Remember, it's a guarantee twenty thousand dollar proposition. Now look, Ben I want you to go through the ins and outs of this things with me. I've got nobody to talk to, Ben, and the woman has suffered, you hear me?¹¹

Ben is a complex psychological symbol which represents Willy yearning for success and at the same time highlights the frustrations of Willy for he is always at a loss to understand the secret of the success of Ben. Ben appears quite a number of times in the hallucinations of Willy. The memory sequence or hallucinations do not constitute the conventional flash-back, for we mark temporal and special fluctuations in the scenes in which these are illustrated. As a result there is dual conversation, which signifies the temporal and spatial fluctuations. In one of the memory sequences Ben appears and talks to Willy while simultaneously a conversation goes on between Willy and Charley who are playing cards. The following conversation illustrates temporal and spatial fluctuations:

Ben : How are you all?
 Willy : (taking a pot smiling) Fine, Fine.
 Charley: Pretty sharp tonight.
 Ben : Is mother living with you?
 Willy : No. she died a long time ago.
 Charley: Who?

Ben : That's too bad. Find specimen of a lady, Mother.
 Willy : (to Charley): Hey?
 Ben : I'd hoped to see the old girl.
 Charley: Who died?
 Ben : Heard anything from Father, have you?
 Willy : (unnerved) what do you mean, who died?¹²

This conversation illustrates the subjective reality concurrently with the objective world. Miller tries to show a kaleidoscope of consciousness in which the past and present are concurrent. Miller himself explains the treatment of time in the play, by referring to the title of this play which he had conceived at first.

The presentation of Ben is an important clue as to exactly how and why playwright is using expressionism in the play. Ben is distinctly less 'real' than the other characters of the play, because he is not so much a person as the embodiment of Willy's desire for escape and success. Willy calls him "success incarnate". This is proved by the fact that he does not only appear in the memory scene but is summoned up at the end to "discuss" Willy's plan of suicide; obviously, he here represents a side of Willy's own mind. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the stage direction emphasizes that Ben always appears at exactly the moment Willy thinks of him. The figure of Ben, then, represents not Ben as he actually was, so much a Ben as his image has been warped in the mind of Willy. And this reveals the peculiar nature of expressionism in the play.

Obviously, Miller is not dramatizing, abstract forces in politics, economics or history like German writer of the 1920s. He is using the expressionistic technique solely as a means of revealing the character of Willy Loman,¹³ the values Willy holds and, particularly, the way his mind works. Miller's reason for blending realism and expressionism in "Death of a Salesman" is that this combination reflects the protagonist's actual way of thinking: "I wish to create a form", says Miller, "which...would literally be the process of Willy Loman's mind".¹⁴ Realistic and naturalistic scenes intermingle with expressionistic effects. This happens particularly in those scenes in which the memory sequences of the hallucinations occur.

The influence of Dostoevski, Freud and Bergson on the literary expressionism of Miller in 'Death of a Salesman' can be perceived in Willy's sense of guilt and repression with reference to the Boston episode. Thus when Miller tried to explore and discover the hidden truths of existence he makes use of psychoanalysis and concurrent treatment of time and deals with the sexual motif also.

The failed father Willy wants to see his idea of success materializes in Biff whose image is enlarged by Willy even as a football player. However, Boston episode makes Biff feel that his father too is an idol with feet of clay. Biff surprises Willy in the extra-marital company of Miss Francis and tells his father that the latter is a fake. This is an impression which Biff maintains throughout the play. He says that Willy does not want anybody who knows to be around him. Father-son relationship is shown in a very dark aspect in the restaurant scene when Biff and Happy go away with the girls they have picked up and Happy even says that Willy is not their father and that he is just a guy. In spite of this antagonism both Willy and Biff have affection for each other. Willy wishes that Biff should get settled and lives in the house they are occupying. Biff ultimately breaks down while trying to tell his father that the latter has the “phoney dreams”. Biff’s advancement is considered by Willy before he commits suicide and leaves the insurance money of twenty thousand dollars. Thus Miller keeps in mind the filial bonds and the impact of current civilization in mind while treating the Freudian motif of father son relationship.

However, Willy can not forget the Boston episode, where he commits adultery despite the fact that he loves Linda, his wife; because he is unable to reconcile... himself with the idea of permissive sex as Happy is able to do. Willy’s act of adultery in Boston is social and moral transgression. He tries to explain this socio-moral transgression to Biff by saying that he was utterly lonely. Willy can not stand the sight of Linda mending the stocking because it reminds him of the stocking with Miss. Francis demanded and he obliged her in return for the extra-marital gratification and this reminder is one of his transgression and therefore of his guilt which he tries to repress. The Boston episode is not narrated but illustrated when Willy’s psyche responds to the stimulus of the circumstances involving the sexual filtrations of Happy and Biff when they go out of the restaurant with girls they have picked up. The expressionistic effect is particularly created and enhanced by the queer and intermittent laughter of the woman Miss. Francis. Ronald Hayman in his book “Arthur Miller”, says, “All through the play Miller uses sex as a means of carrying his social arguments forward. Willy, Biff and Happy all behave badly over sexual relationship and in each case Miller demonstrates very effectively how their bad behaviour reflects their social conditioning and expresses their resentment of the role society forces them to play.”¹⁵

Willy Loman is a product of a world which is bereft of the sense of values. Whatever this world takes to be values are actually disvalues. Willy is a prey to the currency of disvalues in the contemporary society. Miller himself remarked; “The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideals. However, Willy feels very strongly about these ideals. He becomes ecstatic while contemplating the fortunes of Singleman and Ben. The ecstasy of Willy is easily marked when he relates the Singleman and the Ben-motif with his sons or himself, because this gives him a hope of the fulfilment of his ideals. However, we know that Willy’s life is a fake and that which is fake is not acceptable to the value oriented Miller.

To understand in detail, here we must take into account the background of values available to Willy when he assesses his valuelessness. Willy can think of values associated with three places, namely New York, New England, Alaska and Africa. The value associated with New York is purely mechanistic, commercialized, material and physical. This is what we gather from the limited vision of Willy, the irresponsibility and sex-exploits of his sons Biff and Happy, the big business of Howard, Charley and Oliver. New York is the city where the Loman family is ‘boxed in’ in their apartment, though they have dreams of the great outdoors and plans of visiting New England. The expressionistic technique of Miller reveals that in the mind of Willy New England is associated chiefly with sales of motif symbolized by the successful salesman Dave Singleman. Further it is associated with stocking motif, that is Willy’s adultery, and therefore with a sense of guilt in Willy. Alaska and Africa are associated with Ben motif that is materialistic success in the mind of Willy. All the three sources of value available to Willy do not provide him an opportunity to come into the light of reality and shed his ‘wrong dreams’. Willy, being lost in the valueless world and society around him, is a conformist and that too an unthinking conformist and in being so he is doomed. Willy is doomed because, as Miller has pointed out, he loses his grip on the forces of life and does not have a sense of values.

Willy is trapped by his adherence to two contradictory ways of life. On the one hand, he burns with a consuming desire to recapture the past and on the other hand, he is fervently determined to succeed in his contemporary competitive society. Willy, the outdoor man, and Willy the artisan have no place in an urban civilization; he is a misfit there. An aspect of Willy’s dilemma, as Benjamin Nelson has observed, is that he is caught between two cultures; the vanished agrarian frontier that he rhapsodically associated with his father...who used to wagon his entire family across the country selling handmade flutes; and modern urban society, the tape recorder civilization of Howard Wabner.¹⁶

2. Conclusion

Willy’s illusions, throughout his whole life are threatened by realities. Sometimes he can not comprehend them, but more he stubbornly refuses to face their implications. For Willy, greatness in life or death is the only alternative. He will not be little. He commits suicide, but drama does not conclude with its protagonist’s death; it continues through his funeral. In the Requiem, Charley provides the plays’ most eloquent justification for Willy’s romantic hopefulness, in which he reinforced the impression that Willy is a pathetic victim. He replies Biff, “Nobody does blame this man. You don’t understand; Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don’t put a bolt to a nut, he don’t tell you the law or give you a machine. He is away out there in the blue; riding on a smile and a shoe shine, and when they start not smiling back that’s an earthquake...Nobody does blame this man. A salesman is got to dream.”¹⁷. ‘Death of a Salesman’ is a drama thoroughly cantered in the main stream of American theatre. It presents a critical outlook on the contemporary American Society. First produced in February 1949, ‘Death of a Salesman’ created a sensational impact. Miller himself in ‘Introduction to a Collected Plays’ tells us about the reactions, that in one periodical of the far Right the play was called a “time bomb expertly placed under the edifice of Americanism.” Directed by Elia Kazan, with a marvelous prop of setting and lighting devised by Jo Mielziner, the play met with a world-wide reception and was translated into

almost all the major languages. In America it was attacked as a piece of communist propaganda. Miller's close-up picture of the contemporary America and his parody of the American Institutions left the suspicion in the Establishment circle that he was a sympathizer of Communism. This suspicion was revived by Miller's play, 'The Crucible'. The play also confirmed the playgoer's interpretation that Miller was a topical dramatist who deals with injustice in American society.

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