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Depression, Neurotic Weakness: The Main Theme of Arthur Miller's *a Memory of Two Mondays*

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Abstract:

Miller's A Memory of Two Mondays is memory of its protagonist, who unfolds it in the form a tale that forms the plot of the play. Tom Wingfield, who reveals the story of Tennessee Williams's famous play The Glass Menagerie says, "The play is memory". Bert, the chief exponent of Miller's A Memory of Two Mondays, has similar ideas while unfolding the story of the play. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were contemporary American dramatists. There are remarkable similarities we witness in the formats of both the plays. Protagonists of both the plays appear to similar neurotic inclination. The protagonists in both the plays find themselves in banal human situations they are not suitable for. And in both the plays they endeavour to make their existence meaningful and reasonable interesting. In fact, in both the plays the characters try to live aesthetically and romantically in an exclusive world devoid of any romance.

Keywords: Story, play, witness, existence

1. Introduction

In both the plays, we have tales of hope and aspiration. In both the plays, we find protagonists trying to escape from the routine and monotony, and getting caught midway without having consummation of their desire. At the end, they find themselves wandering here and there carrying their memory with them. Both the protagonists, Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Bert in *A Memory of Two Mondays*, try to re-live their past through their respective memories. Ultimately, both of them say adieu mournfully as "Tom's sister Laura blows out her candles and Bert's friend Kenneth concludes his song."ⁱ

Other particularity of the protagonists relate to their affiliation to their respective creators. For instance, Bert, more or less, dramatizes Miller, just as Tom represents Williams on the stage. In Tom's memory exists the family conflict that reminds the audience of the conflict that the Williams's family indulged in at St. Louis during the period of Great Economic Depression of 1930? Similarly, Bert makes the audience aware of the period of a year and half when Miller worked in the warehouse of automobile spare parts in Manhattan during the same period of Depression.

Almost all the protagonists of Miller are always on the run for achieving for something. They are unstable neurotically. Only John Proctor, in *The Crucible*, is of some mental stability, and that, too, only in the beginning. In the final phase of his life, even Proctor goes berserk. Bert, in *A Memory of Two Mondays*, resembles most other protagonists. He, too, remains always on the run. It is true that he is anxious to acquire knowledge, and whatever he does as odd jobs is only to earn financial support for his college education. However, he begins to get instruction even while working in the warehouse. So, his journey to light and knowledge starts with his initiation into the process of maturity. And gradual slide from the comfort zone of adolescent innocence into the doubt and cynicism of adult experience forms the central theme of the play.

There are, in addition, some characteristics of Bert that make him an individual different from other protagonists. For instance, all the knowledge and experience that Bert acquires does not enlighten him about his own self. That is the reason why he remains utterly confused and devoid of conclusive clarity about life and its working patterns. The only realization that he gets is that life is a mystery and a stretch in obscurity. Utterly as he is, he lives the warehouse, but by then he has been initiated into the process of education. There are co-workers of Bert who continue to live in despair, and do not try to come out of the disgusting situation. It is only Bert who comes out of it. That is why Miller says:

After all, from this endless, timeless, will-less environment, a boy emerges who will not accept its defeat or its mood as final, and literally takes himself off on a quest a higher gratification.ⁱⁱ

It may be a good opinion of the writer, but many of the scholars do not agree with it. Despite his emergence as an optimistic and assertive individual, Bert fails to attract the attention of the viewers as a confident, dynamic and enthusiastic youth even after his

entering into the most vibrant phase of human life. Whenever he makes his appearance, he seems to be neurotically unsound, deformed, and disinclined. He comes before the audience as a promising individual. Throughout the play, he remains somewhat disengaged and passive. Even his escape from “the endless, timeless, will-less environment” does not remain strikingly sustained in the memory of the audience as those, such as, Gus, Larry, Kenneth, Tommy, Agnes, Jimmy, Patricia, and Raymond, who stay behind. As Benjamin Nelson opines:

Together, like the denizens of *The Lotus Depths*, they are the protagonists of *A Memory of Two Mondays*, and through them the play speaks sadly and humorously of change and inertia, hope and despair, life and death – all the aspects of the supreme mystery that Bert is only beginning to comprehend.ⁱⁱⁱ

Just as there is little growth and richness of experience in Bert, the two Mondays he keeps in his memory remain somewhat similar. They appear to be routine Mondays. There is even no change the characters and also they remain indulged the same activities. Their conversations are replete with the repetitive jokes and comments. Of course, there seems to be deterioration in the personalities of some the characters. In the first scene, Kenneth emerges as a sensitive, imaginative, and emotional Irishman. But, in the second scene, he is portrayed as an alcoholic, although he continues to be compassionate and emotional with aesthetic sense. His loss of enthusiasm in the vibrant existence of youthful inquisitiveness marks his slow and steady descent. Continued dwindling of spirit indicates Kenneth’s sliding down into the quagmire of neurotic distraction.

However, Tom Kelly is characterised as a growing protagonist. The man who is a hopeless drunkard in the beginning fit enough to be fired from his employment grows slowly in the next scene and exhibits the strength of will by getting rid of addiction.

These are though collateral changes, they are certainly not correlated. And their change does not auger well for the co-workers. Instead, they feel loss of natural psychosis. To them, Kenneth known for his charm and spontaneity is a drunken soul. And Tom has though undergone a desirable change, does not interact with his friends with the same enthusiasm any more. He has been transformed into a self-righteous, uninteresting youth. The opinionated personage in Tom Kelly is in contrast with his former self who happened to be inebriated but full of charm and liveliness.

Larry’s case is somewhat similar. He is also a study in neurotic vulnerability. His relationship with Patricia, a worker in the outer office, is testimony to his neurotic deformity. Larry feels suffocated in the company of his associations, and to get rid of the suffocating environment he tries to assert himself. In the effort to come out of the bondage, he buys a car which he scarcely affords. He is fed up with his quarrelsome wife, and his brother and sister who always exhort him to take up the responsibilities of the family and the relatives. So he desires to escape from the monotony of every-day heated discussion in the family on mostly non-issues. In an attempt to get rid of this monotony, he invites Patricia for a long-drive. Larry is happy for the revival of his lost assertiveness even if it is momentary. But, very soon, there occurs a chance when he succeeds in tracing out an old-modelled piece of machinery part in the jungle of the stored mechanical parts. All the workers look at Larry with wonder and reverence when he explains to Bert as to how he could locate the obsolete piece. Thus, Larry struggles out to assert himself and win back his confidence by vanquishing the agents that have been instrumental in making him lose his power of assertion.

However, the second Monday brings him defeat and desolation. He sells out the car. Affair with Patricia proves to be short-lived, and he is back into his past agony. In this case, Patricia is also a loser, because he may find many lovers, but not any of them as sincere as Larry. Thus, almost all the characters, Kenneth, Tom, Larry and Patricia, lose out much of the charm of the previous Monday.

The same is the case with other characters, which too do not change considerably. There is almost stagnancy as far as the development of the characters as a human being is concerned. There is hardly any visible change occurring between the two Mondays in the lives and perceptions of the characters. Raymond remains stuck with routine as manager. Gus remains as lecherous as he was earlier. Agnes is a spinster, and she continues to live with her virgin-like shyness and hesitation. Jerry and Willy, in spite of their genuine endeavour to look more and more sophisticated, continue to behave as clumsily as ever. Frank is a truck-driver. He is interested only in his girlfriends spread up along various streets of New York. So he plans his movement in such a way that he may avail of the opportunity to enjoy the company of one of his girl-friends. And Jim remains honestly associated with Gus. Thus, the things move with routine monotony.

However, freshness and zeal of first Monday is visible on the second Monday. Even Bert’s enthusiastic recollections lose much of their charm by the time he begins to recall the happenings of the second Monday. The workers, who as individuals, do not grow dramatically but they experience loss of their spontaneity and vitality. Their growing age begins to cast its shadow. They look more perturbed, more tired, and more wretched. They seem to be the glow-lost shades of their former self. They appear to be entering into the winter-light, and trying to remain visible to the people around. In fact, they are all in their neurotic decline.

In another sequence, Kenneth cleans the window to have a clear view. But when he opens the window, his eyes fall on the brothel outside. He gets disgusted by the view, and complains to his employer. But employer tells him that he should have not washed the window. It is a significant incident in the sense that characters are strong enough to improve the situation, or bring about a change in their neighbourhood. In fact they are so frail that they have to make compromise with the situation, and struggle to survive. They are moulded in such a way that they have to condition themselves to live in the absence of light. They are not even neurotically inclined to die for the cause they choose in their life, as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, and John Proctor in *The Crucible* could do.

Arthur Miller has stated that *A Memory of Two Mondays* is a pathetic comedy. The statement is true only the extent that the co-workers who are left behind after the departure of Bert succeed to win sympathy of the audience. But this sympathy is not generated because they are transformed into better personages full of newly cultivated goodness or newly earned sense of morality, and despite that they suffer. They could evoke sympathy of the audience because they remain stuck to their destined situation withal passivity at their command, and perhaps because of their neurotic deformity. The readers feel compassion also because their being nincompoop,

and no-resisting attitude. In fact, they never express any grudge against their fate or against any extraneous agent for being in such miserable condition. Anyhow, they strive to cope with the situation. Benjamin Nelson writes:

One of the compelling reasons we feel compassion for these people is because they do not ask for it; they do not feel sorry for themselves. Loudly and actively they affirm their existences in that musty community, laughing, crying even sporadically raging against their woefully circumscribed destinies.^{iv}

And of all the characters, Gus is the greatest survivor. He remains conditioned to the situation remorselessly as a domineering old lecher. The vigour and neurotic predilection that he exhibits is of colossal dimension. He is great sufferer. In the very scene, he faces the death of his wife. In second scene, he appears before the audience in the usual spirit of drunkenness passing lecherous remarks against the girls, stalking, and abusing his employer. But, at the same time, he is sad for the death of his wife. Suffering through bundle of adversities, Gus lives life full size, drinking, lechering, and rioting against the civic gentleness. Even at the time of his ultimate destruction, he remains uncompromising and rebellious.

Gus dies as die Joe Keller, Willy Loman, and John Proctor. His death does not evoke emotions of civility. Towards the end of his life, he is greatly depressed because of monotony of life. One fails to understand as to why he is depressed with monotony, because his life is full of variety of experiences. At last juncture of enjoyment, he withdraws entire money from the bank, purchases new clothes, hire girls for company, hire three taxis, one for Jim and one additional for emergency, moves from bar to bar enjoying drinks pleasurable company of girls. Finally he dies in a taxi even when girls are still present in the taxi. Is it not neurotic defiance? However, his rebellion, his bravado, his adventure could not vitalise his neurotic frailty. The monotony of being in the warehouse for so many years has brought about neurotic deformity in his very personality. His valedictory speech at the time of his leaving the warehouse adequately summarises the turns and twists his neurotic faculty has gone through:

When Mr. Eagle was in high school I was here. When there was Winston Six I was here. When was Minerva car I was here. When was Stanley Steamer I was here, and Stearns Knight, and Marmon was good car; he was young boy; work hard be manager. When Agnes still think she was gonna get married I was here. When was Locomobile, and Model K Ford and Model N Ford – all them different Fords, and Franklin was good car, Jordan car, Reo car, Pierce Arrow, and Cleveland car – all them was good cars. All them times I was here.^v

Gus's style of living does not make him a hero, it symbolizes his neurotic weakness. He, too, dies, but not for a heroic cause, as Proctor does or for his family, as Willy does. He dies in miserable conditions because of his uncontrolled sensuality, reckless flamboyance, and mis-adventurous attitude. However, there is certainly a pattern in his ways of living. His death also signifies human defeat in stagnating situation. Those who remain behind after Bert's departure from the warehouse, stagnate with ordinariness.

There is perpetual movement. Everybody appears to be busily moving from one place to other. As the plays closes down, Bert is seen walking through with all aloofness at his command while there is noise all around because of on-going activities. Willy picks up an order slip from the hook and appears quite busy. Kenneth working on a package; Jerry goes out with a parcel; Jim seems to be very busy as he comes in a hurry, drops something from the table, and in a huff leaves; Larry is seen carrying a coffee box, and looking at the orders; Patricia moves away into the fresh air, as if she feels suffocating inside, and Tom is busy with the pile of records looking into them and checking out with a receipt in his hand. Thus, everywhere people are busy. Too much activity, too much hullabaloo, too much restlessness, but such stasis, it is stunning. Benjamin nelson's opinion is quite telling:

Things are sent out, things are received – but nothing is really accomplished, and as the activity continues, time slips away, slowly and imperceptibly narrowing the circumferences of the lives that comprise the existence of that large, pallid room. Only the boy, edging hesitantly and disappointedly toward the door, makes a movement that is not circular and self-defeating.^{vi}

2. Conclusion

As the things become clear, we feel lost in the quagmire of confusion. Because the play seems to be so good as far as the structure is concerned. But there is no conflict, no strife of the family, no moral upsurge, no self-realization. No protagonist seems even to be involved in an act of qualitative accomplishment. The play does not send out any message of free-will or commitment to a certain cause. But the entire fabric of the play elicits an elegiac sensibility. It evokes a feeling of emotional sensibility for the protagonists who act as do because of their neurotic inclination. Furthermore, there is a trend of neurotic submission to the circumstances which churn out admixture of joy and sorrow, struggle and surrender, enthusiasm and indolence.

3. References

- i. Ibid, p. 199.
- ii. Arthur Miller, 'Introduction', Collected Works, p.49.
- iii. Benjamin Nelson, Arthur Miller: Portrait of a Playwright, David McKay Company INC., New York, 1970, p. 203.
- iv. Ibid, p. 206.
- v. Arthur Miller, 'Introduction', Collected Plays, p. 370.
- vi. Ibid, 'Introduction', Collected Plays p. 48.