

CONFLICT BETWEEN MIND AND SOUL: A NIHILISTIC VIEW IN *THE PRICE* BY ARTHUR MILLER

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The Price, by Arthur Miller dramatizes the ambivalent relationship of Victor and Walter Franz, in the light of individual freedom and socio economic pressure. The two brothers form the dramatic nucleus of the play. In a soon to be demolished family house, two brothers meet again after a gap of many years to dispose of their parents' property. Their confrontation leads them to examine the events and the qualities of their different lives and the price that is of them had to pay. Miller, in fact, returns in this play, to a family, in a renewed exploration of the relationship between actions and consequences, guilt and responsibilities and preservation of self and their different commitments. The play takes place in the attic room where Victor lived with his father who had retired after erratic 1929, which reduced the Franz family from prosperity to relative poverty. Apparently, the management of the family affairs had been out into the hands of number of uncles who took over the ten-room Brownstone Mansion and arranged for the renting out of rooms. At an unspecified time not long after the loss of the family and the death of Mrs. Franz, Walter, the elder left home to attend medical school. This left the younger brother, Victor (who would have been about twelve years of age in 1929) and his father alone in a two –room apartment on the upper floor of the house. Here they lived together with all of the family's unaccountable furniture, which they had crowded into the attic with them. Around 1934, Victor joined university and shortly thereafter met Esther, his would be. When of nineteen years, Victor felt that he could no longer finance his own education and support his father, and therefore went to his brother Walter, then in medical practice and asked for a loan of dollar 500. Walter, declined the loan to him. Feeling that he could not abandon his responsibilities, Victor gave up his plan to become a doctor, and joined the New York Police Force. He continued to support his father until the old man died in about 1959. Because of the resentment he felt towards his brother, Victor never communicated with him freely and consequently the two drifted apart. As it become clear that the proceeds from the sale of the family furniture would be divided, Victor decided to put off disposing of it as the ageing building was about to tear down. Finally, having tired of trying unsuccessfully to contact his brother, he decides to go ahead and contacts a used furniture dealer and calls him to the apartment to negotiate the sale of estate. Later Walter joins them for the sale.

As the men confront each other in the cluttered attic of their parents' home, their latent antagonism quickly flares up the hostility, and some initial arguments about the prices of the furniture explode into a blistering quarrel over the less tangoed but more pervasive prices each had paid for the life he had fashioned. In the presence of Victor's loyal but weary wife Esther and an elderly Jewish furniture

dealer, Gregory Solomon an embarrassed and helpless referee, the two brothers begin to slash at each other. That lay bare all the malaise for each other, that has developed over the years. “Illusions and rationalization or punctured by the verbal rapiers the two man wield against each other until at the end of the duel each has been laid bare to the bone of reality and forced to accept some of the truths he had attempted to conceal. And each than departs, having gained some new awareness but still essentially powerless to alter the role he has played for more than half his life.”¹

The plot, at first sight, looks simple and ordinary. In a given situation, two individuals respond differently. The real question here involved is who acted wisely and whose decision was the right decision. The answer to this question is, however, not as simple as it appears to be. One really needs to take into account of their entire background and circumstances. 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 see each other after remaining estranged for sixteen years. The basic question involved is one of choices they made for themselves. In its essence, thus, *The Price* has the making of an existential tragedy. Existentialists claim that man is surrounded by objective uncertainties and that in a world full of possibilities man really has to make a choice. Both the brothers in this play were too called upon to make their choices at a crucial stage, when their father, supported them; while one brother chose to be with his father, the other decided to walk away in order to brighten his own prospects of success. Having lived their lives according to their choices, they are made to examine the quality of life each has lived and the price each had paid for it. This whole process reveals the anguish of their hearts. The reader feels the tragic feeling that is evoked through the enactment of the whole process and ironically learns that whatever happens is something that cannot be reversed. Man facing this kind of social dilemma, as if in a pit, always struggles to escape. However, having gone too far in life, finds no possible escape route. In the battle, he achieves a measure of greatness and his fate touches us all.

Like Miller, Victor too undergoes through harsh and bitter experiences during the economic depression. This makes him conscious of the debilitating impact of a Capitalistic society on man. It taught him that such a society is inherently weak and its money ethos is cultivated on false premises. His disillusionment with such external values makes him accept Solomon’s unfair price in spite of Esther’s admonition. He cannot affirm any positive value to pursue in life that he must opt after retiring from the police force. Esther does not realize that his will to choose an alternative life has been paralyzed. When she asks him, “Why can’t you make a move?”² Victor says, “I’m not sure the whole thing wasn’t a little unreal.”³ In spite of having made his choice freely and consciously, he is still beset by doubts: whether what he had chosen was right and true. Not even Esther can convince him when she says, “It makes the same sense it ever made,”⁴ so that she has to ask him, “What do you want?”⁵ It is a simple Question but its answer is not so simple, for it implies that Victor should wholeheartedly believe in his original choice. However, Victor cannot answer this question, for he doubts the truth of his choice, like a nihilist. He also sees himself sentenced to a life of material mediocrity, especially in comparison to Walter.

Though Victor “hated every moment” of being in the police force despite serving for twenty-eight years, yet was unable to make this choice and take a final step. He has been “like a zombie ever since the retirement came up.”⁶ This is partly the consequence of his first choice. He knows that this choice, too, would be irreversible. Esther says, “ It’s like pushing against a door for twenty-five years and suddenly it opens... and we stand there”.⁷ Now, that the alternative is in front of Victor, whose will to choose is paralyzed. He is not only frustrated by the futile life he has lived, but also by the emptiness of the life stretching out in front of him. He cries out like a nihilist :

“ I look at my life and the whole thing is incomprehensible to me. I know all the reasons and it ends up – nothing.”⁸ The meaninglessness and nothingness of his life weights down upon him harsh. Now several harsh realities of life dawn upon him – that his choice to support his father was in the wrong spirit, also that joining the police force was also a wrong decision—yet he cannot do anything, because he is too perplexed. He is disillusioned with a life sacrificed to unrewarding moral scruples about love and duty. He acknowledges that he was wrong about his father, who was only “a busted businessman like thousands of others, and I acted like some kind of a mountain crashed.”⁹ Twenty-eight years -- half a life – spent on the police force seems wasted and aimless, for they were spent on his principles of self-sacrifice. So, he must admit,

I’m not even sure any more what I was trying to accomplish.

I look back now, and all I can see now is a long brainless walk in the street.¹⁰

Walter, too, acted as a nihilist who always thought of people only in terms of money that he could fleece out of them, was refused to an automation. He took the world only in terms of the recognition it could accord to him. Gradually, he comes to realize that this falsity and hollowness has a great potential source of evil. His success depended on the fear that power could generate in those who are powerless. With the passage of time, Walter actually encounters a stage where he had to intimidate his wife with the threat of life. It was in this moment of transcendent knowledge that Walter experienced the meaningless terror of ‘ambition’ cautiousness’, and the terror of having sold his soul to the ‘pilling up of money’. It was a moment when he realized that self-image he was chasing was false, illusory and a mirage.

At one point, Walter tells Victor that he was responsible for making him ‘understand’ himself. Victor’s choice regarding their father has always haunted him and he rather fruitlessly sought to understand the meaning of his actions. This comprehension dawned on him only when he was facing his wife. With a knife in his hand, in a fit of lunacy. He realized that Victor had deliberately chosen and what he had chosen was ‘real life’. “And that’s an expensive thing ; it costs”.¹¹ Victor had chosen not only self –sacrifice but also a life based on sound values ;irrespective of the cost that such a life would extract from him. Walter begins to see Victor a person sure of his convictions and priorities and this demeans him as a man chasing a mirage. He finds himself pursuing the false values of materialism throughout his life. Now he understands the meaninglessness of those worldly values

and worldly materialism. Here he finds himself under the nihilistic forces throughout his life. He says, “I’ve struggled so long for a concept of myself and I’m not sure I can make it believable to you”.¹² He was driven by a sub-conscious need to prove himself; to prove that he could outrace any competition ; to prove his superiority by operating the ‘ inoperable.’ Behind all these motives was a terror and a frenzied need to somehow be able to avoid the fate that had befallen their father. The overnight degradation and failure of their father haunted Walter and he sought to escape it by being as successful as possible. And, according to Walter, Victor’s rejection of the rat-race was based on this same terror of failure, for he reasoned that he can be a failure only when he once becomes a success and by negating one he thought he would negate the other as well.

However, Walter confesses that Victor’s superiority is enviable for “the difference is that you haven’t hurt other people to defend yourself. And I’ve learned to respect that, Vic”¹³ while Walter has trampled over everyone—father, family, etc. – in a desperate bid to excel, Walter faltered on moralistic ground as he left everyone behind in the family on their fate shirking his duties and familial responsibilities. This aspect of the character gets the dark desires in a man; hence, the characterization is realistic but nihilistic. Walter is convinced that this is the reason Victor’s marriage has endured, their son has excelled and their life has been so meaningful. Victor does not have to face alienation and the loneliness that Walter has to face.

REFERENCES:

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4. *Ibid.*, p.110
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6. *Ibid.*, p.111
7. *Ibid.*, p.110
8. *Ibid.*, p. 112
9. *Ibid.*, p.111
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