

Arthur Miller's **The Price:** A Sartrean Reading

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ABSTRACT

Although existentialist notions have been partially applied to **The Price**, a thoroughgoing Sartrean analysis is required to fully explain the personal and ideological conflicts in the play. In it, two middle-aged brothers, Victor and Walter Franz, come together after a long estrangement to dispose of the family furniture, which represents the posthumous presence of their father. He, it is evident, is the key to their relationship, for Victor, a New York cop, harbours a deep-seated resentment against his brother for deserting him and his father during the Great Depression, and Walter, an affluent surgeon, suffers from unexpiated guilt for his egotism and success. During the play the deeper existential and social issues embedded within these basic emotional attitudes are brought to the surface.

With the onset of the 1930s economic crisis and their family's sudden plunge into poverty the two brothers chose contrasting projects: Walter thrust upwards to success and invulnerability; Victor settled for the dull security of the police force. Yet neither son is content with the man he invented. Walter has lost any sense of human relatedness, while Victor finds his life unreal, absurd. Solomon, the octogenarian furniture dealer, articulates the existential themes of the need to create value in an absurd world and of the relativism of truth and 'viewpoint'.

Victor blames external conditions for his life and so he is guilty in Sartrean terms of 'bad faith', and finally his initial act of choice and assertion of value is wrung from him. He asserted the necessity for relatedness and community and oriented his life toward the family and the social order, but Walter asserted the necessity for separateness and success and oriented his life toward an individualistic careerism. This dichotomy of values dramatized in the two Franz brothers embodies a tension in liberal individualism between the demands of the individual on the one hand and of the collectivity on the other. For Miller, as for Sartre, personal choice and the social order are integrally related.

Arthur Miller has been tentatively called "the most Sartrean of living dramatists" (Hayman, 1971:73-79). It is a suggestive insight and it has been fruitfully applied to **Incident at Vichy** (Lowenthal, 1975: 29-40).

Yet its interpretative appositeness to **The Price** has not been fully recognised. The notions of bad faith and the absurd have been introduced into discussions of the play, but **The Price** invites more than a partially existentialist reading (Bigsby 1970:16-25 & Willett, 1971: 307-310). Its highly charged personal and ideological conflicts demand, I would suggest, a thoroughgoing Sartrean analysis if their ambivalences and complexities are to be more fully explicated and the play's dense richness of meaning is to be more deeply understood. For as in so much of his work Miller is here exploring the relations between personal responsibility, identity and social action, and Sartre's philosophy, concerned as it also is with these relations, offers conceptual formulations that help to illuminate what Miller presents through dramatic form.

In **The Price** he again takes up that triadic complex of a father and two sons which he had employed much earlier in **All My Sons** and **Death of a Salesman** but he relocates the focus of dramatic tension on the pair of filial protagonists, Victor and Walter Franz. They come together after a protracted estrangement to dispose of the family furniture which, endowed by Miller with an extraordinary symbolic density, represents in its late-1920s conspicuous opulence their joint youthful past and the looming, posthumous presence of their father. He, it becomes evident, is the key to their relationship and the source of their dissension. Victor, the ponderous New York cop, harbours a deep-seated resentment against his brother for deserting him and his father during the Slump, and Walter, the affluent surgeon, suffers from an unexpiated guilt for his egotism and relative success. The process of the play is the gradual extrusion under the pressure of their personal opposition of the deeper existential and social issues embedded within these basic emotional attitudes.

Like Miller's own father Franz père, we learn, lost his substantial fortune in the Wall Street Crash and ensuing Depression, and this crisis of American capitalism, mediated to the two sons through the collapse of their family's economic security, was a traumatic event for both, driving them towards contrasting values and life-patterns and haunting their psychology in the present. The breakdown of "the system", hinted at or referred to many times, and the sudden, irrational eruption of scarcity into their comfortable environment impressed upon them, with diverse consequences, the prime need for survival. Walter thrust upwards to achieve professional excellence and material success but he admits that it was the dread of insecurity and the feeling of vulnerability before sweeping social forces which ultimately powered his individualistic ambition. His driving anxiety, he confesses, was the fear of it ever happening to me-- he glances at the center chair-- as it happened to him. Overnight, for no reason, to find yourself degraded and thrown-down."¹ He wanted to be not only "tops" but "untouchable".

Victor, by contrast, sought escape from the vagaries of capitalism and support for himself and his father in the financial security of the civil service. As a humble policeman he rejected, and continues to reject, the success and glamour ethic which Walter embodies and which his wife urges him to embrace. He has opted out of "the rat race" and refuses to involve himself with the competitive ranking of the status hierarchy.

In Sartrean terms two alternative projects were born out of the familial and social crisis of the Depression, each set of existential choices being governed and limited by this specific historical phase. Both projects were in response to a similar anxiety about the bourgeois order, but whilst one illustrated the pursuance of the dominant bourgeois values to a fanatical extreme, the other demonstrated a refusal of those values and the adoption of others. The emphasis on time in the play and the prewar furniture's effect of telescoping the brothers' personal histories incline us to regard Victor and Walter not only as mature men confronting their past but also, reciprocally, in that frozen "moment" of the Depression, as young men confronting their futures, confronting themselves as largely accomplished projects for which they must now bear responsibility.

Neither son is content with the man he invented, and Victor refuses to accept full responsibility for his own making. In an interview in 1970 (**Modern Drama**, 43-39) just two years after **The Price**, Miller said, "By one compromise or another, or by one ambition or another, we end up where we're no longer ourselves. We're empty, or we feel we have no possibility of some kind of reconciliation with existence, and there are various intensities with which we pursue that reconciliation". Walter pursued his ambition so ruthlessly he became dissociated from himself and had a breakdown: "All I ever wanted was simply to do science, but I invented an efficient, disaster-proof, money-maker" (p.110). His single-minded drive towards excellence also cost him any sense of human relatedness, but after his recovery he has a new "concept" of himself and is attempting a reconciliation with existence. Working half his time in City hospitals, he feels "alive" again and he tries to re-establish that brotherhood with Victor which his egotistical ambition led him to deny.

In the first half of the play, before Walter's arrival, Miller establishes that Victor is suffering an existential crisis. He experiences emptiness and finds his life devoid of meaning, absurd. "I'll be frank with you, kid," he tells his wife, Esther, "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" (p.23). His dominant mood is one of confusion and defeat. He has turned his back on material success, but as he bitterly acknowledges the social pressure towards money-making is pervasive and inescapable: "there's just no respect for anything but money" (p.47). Having spent twenty-eight years denying his emotional and intellectual impulses in the dulling routine of police work, he no longer has any confidence in the value

of the way of life he adopted: "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, brainless walk in the street" (p.48). **The Price** traces the halting, retrospective analysis by which he is finally brought to a reconciliation with an existence from which he initially feels alienated.

Solomon, the octogenarian Jewish furniture dealer, plays an important part in laying the groundwork for this reconciliation, as well as providing comic relief in an intense play. In his pedagogic role of wise old man he first of all berates Victor for his nihilism and despair and then articulates the existential theme of the necessity to create value in an absurd world: "Nothing in the world you believe, nothing you respect -- how can you live? You think that's such a smart thing? That's so hard, what you're doing? Let me give you a piece of advice - it's not that you can't believe nothing, that's not so hard -- it's that you still got to believe it. **That's** hard. And if you can't do that, my friend -- you're a dead man!"(p.37). He sustains the theme by using the furniture to point up the relativism of truth and human values: "the price of used furniture is nothing but a viewpoint, and if you wouldn't understand the viewpoint is impossible to understand the price." A little later this observation is applied directly to the assessment of an existence: "It's the same like secondhand furniture, you see; the whole thing is a viewpoint. It's a mental world"(p.43). It's a mental world: in men's consciousnesses alone do truth and value reside, a truly Sartrean sentiment.² Victor has yet to appreciate this existentialist perspective and has yet to find the "viewpoint" from which he can determine the "price" of his life. His despair arises partly from the fact that there is no external, universal code of worth and meaning to which he can apply for a justification of his existence.

Victor has tended to place the blame for his existence and his failure to achieve a scientific career on external conditions -- the Depression, his father's impoverishment, Walter's indifference. By evading full responsibility for his life he has rendered his existence inauthentic and unreal and is guilty of bad faith, the self-deception which enables him to flee the anguish of freedom, the necessity of consciously choosing value for himself, into determinism.³ For Sartre, "there is no determinism -- man is free, man is freedom,"⁴ and Esther, The Sartrean spokeswoman, challenges Victor with his freedom: "You can't go on blaming everything on him or the system or God knows what else! You're free and you can't make a move, Victor, and that's what's driving my crazy" (p. 78). But for Victor his course of action during the Slump when he gave up college and cared for his father was not freely chosen; it was necessary. "I made no choice," he retorts in answer to Walter's similar challenge, and later he claims, "I didn't invent my life. Not altogether" (p. 101). He cannot accept Walter's Sartrean conviction that "we invent ourselves", nor his charge that his own life has been dedicated to an illusion, a fantasy that said, "Your father was penniless and your brother a son of a bitch, and you play no part at all" (p. 104).

Victor's bad faith, evident in his denial of an act of choice, is compounded by his continued dependence upon that choice as the governing principle of his life. When the Depression ended he did not redefine his project but succumbed to a fixity of purpose. As Sartre points out in a passage remarkably apposite to Victor's case, "Human reality may be defined as a being such that in its being its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize its freedom. Psychologically in each one of us this amounts to trying to take the causes and motives as **things**. We try to confer permanence on them. We attempt to hide from ourselves that their nature and their weight depend each moment on the meaning which I give to them; we take them for constants". (Sartre, 1969:440) Victor, having taken his motives at the time of his father's impoverishment for constants, thus refused his freedom both during the War when he could have obtained a better-paid job and recently when he could have retired. Walter points out that the furniture, even in the thirties, was worth sufficient to pay for Victor's education. Then it represented Victor's unclaimed possibilities in a fetishised form, and now its permanence and solidity embody Victor's reification of his initial, fluid act of choice.⁵

The fixity of Victor's psychology is made further evident in his conviction that after twenty-eight years "the system" is still unstable. His wife tries to tell him, "It's all different now," but he retorts, "What's different now? We're a goddamned army holding this city down and when it blows again you'll be thankful for a roof over your head" (p. 100). His anxious survival mentality is rendered intentionally incongruous in the affluent society he now inhabits. He, who has bought his wife a new suit, is going to the movies, and intends to complain to the Consumers' Union about his shoes, is enmeshed in the atmosphere of postwar mass consumption. Yet his life is still governed by attitudes that are residues from the Depression.

Finally, when Walter has demolished some of the external conditions such as his own indifference and their father's poverty upon which his brother has placed blame, Victor's initial act of decision and assertion of value in an absurd world is wrung from him:

The grass was covered with men. Like a battlefield; a big open-air flophouse. And not bums -- some of them still had shined shoes and good hats, busted businessmen, lawyers, skilled mechanics. Which I'd seen a hundred times. But suddenly -- you know? -- I saw it. **Slight pause.** There was no mercy. Anywhere (p. 107).

Against the social and moral chaos of Depression America Victor asserted -- and he takes on an heroic aspect by virtue of it -- the values of mercy and loyalty. These inform his ideology of social responsibility which he attributes to his cultural conditioning; "But you're brought up to believe in one another, you're filled full of that crap -- you can't help trying to keep it going, that's all. ... I wanted to ... stop it from falling apart." Walter,

however, challenges this interpretation of the family's ethos: "Were we really brought up to believe in one another? We were brought up to succeed, weren't we?" (p. 109). Here, explicitly articulated, is the crucial dichotomy of values between the two brothers. Victor asserted the necessity for relatedness and community and oriented his life towards the family and the social order; Walter asserted the necessity for separateness and success and oriented his life towards an individualistic careerism. Their contradictory references to their family's values indicate that each son identifies in the ambivalent ideological context of his upbringing only those attitudes which sustain his own project. Victor predicated his action on the existence of love; Walter on its absence: "What you saw behind the library was not that there was no mercy in the world, kid. It's that there was no love in this house. There was no loyalty. There was nothing here but a straight financial arrangement."

Walter's forceful statements seem aimed at a demystification of their family life, but they need to be read with some qualification. We miss the significance of the stress laid on viewpoint (and reinforced in Miller's "Production Note") and, consequently, reduce the rich ambivalence of the play if we accept Walter's testimony about the family as objective truth against which Victor's stands only as distortion.⁶ Walter's version has already been partly undercut by his earlier remarks on how much Victor was loved by his mother and by the fact that the father and son kept the mother's harp through the years of penury when, like the piano, it could have fetched a considerable sum. Love of a kind, the evidence of the play suggests, was there in the Franz family, and their family relations, bourgeois as they were, could not be entirely reduced to economic relations. The more important point, which the play enforces, is that there is no objective truth about their family past, but only subjective interpretation. Each son's version is filtered and shaped by his subsequent life and viewpoint and by his need to justify his individual project.

Victor's development towards a fuller existential self-awareness is further dramatised by his rejection of the opportunity to work in science and his final acceptance of himself as a policeman. "Dreams, expectations and hopes," says Sartre, "serve to define a man only as deceptive dreams, abortive hopes, expectations unfulfilled; that is to say, they define him negatively, not positively," (Sartre, 1948:42) Victor's dream of becoming a scientist defines him only negatively, as a choice he never made, as an index of his past failure. Faced with the possibility of realising his hope when Walter offers him a job, he makes his choice and turns the offer down. His refusal, prompted partly by a reluctance to be beholden to Walter in any way, marks his abandonment of the dream and his acceptance of the finitude of his life in Sartre's sense of having inescapably limited oneself by choosing certain possibilities rather than others. Esther, again the existential spokeswoman, later reminds Victor (and the audience) of life's literal finitude: "We are dying, that's what's true" (p. 106). As an integral part of

that acceptance Victor finally acknowledges that his uniform outlines his image, his choice, the man he has invented; hence the significance of his acquiescence at the play's end to Esther's suggestion that he stay dressed as a policeman.⁷

To Walter, Victor and Esther's abandonment of new possibilities seems both a weakness of character, a defeatist submission before the oppressive forces of a competitive society, and a wilful embrace of failure in order to exacerbate his sense of guilt: "You lay down and quit, and that's the long and short of all your ideology. It is all envy!... But your failure does not give you moral authority! Not with me! I **worked** for what I made and there are people walking around today who'd have been dead if I hadn't" (p.112). For Sartre, existential choice is not a purely individual matter; it carries also a generalising moral force: "Of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he **ought** to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen"⁸ Victor's rejection of materialistic and individualistic values poses a threat, therefore, to the stature of Walter's project, and in his self-defence Walter here makes explicit the ideological dimension of individual choice.

This sense of threat, I suggest, is central to an understanding of Walter's strained and, at the close, even hysterical behaviour towards Victor. The source of his desperation can be elucidated a little by considering it in terms of Sartre's being-for-others. "The Other," Sartre writes, "**looks** at me and as such he holds the secret of my being, he knows what I **am**" (Sartre, 1969:363). For Walter, Victor is the all-knowing Other whom he has been afraid to face, because in Victor's look he still confronts that definition of himself as a selfish money-getting egotist which since his recovery he has been trying to supplant with a new "concept". Walter may have a new conception of himself as a socially useful, even brotherly, person but he needs Victor's recognition of it as confirmation.⁹ Victor's look, however, together with his factitious presence as an object in policeman's uniform carry an accusation, and so deny him the necessary endorsement. From Walter's point of view Victor's stance is negative and enslaving, fixing his freedom, which he can reclaim only through struggle with him. "Conflict," Sartre says, "is the original meaning of being-for-others" (Sartre, 1969:364).

Paradoxically, Walter can transcend Victor's limiting look only by confirming him in his own freedom. If he can be made to accept full responsibility for his failed life, he automatically absolves Walter of moral guilt, abandons that definition of him as a selfish, culpable person, and endorses Walter's values of individualism and unfettered personal advancement. Victor's refusal of the offered job and his reconciliation with his policeman's identity, however, constitute, a defeat for Walter's new self-definition, because Victor's acceptance of the finitude of his life bestows

also an enslaving finitude upon Walter's life. These existential aspects of the brothers' conflict help to explain the urgency with which Walter impels Victor towards an assumption of freedom and open possibility as well as the desperate frustration he manifests in his last moments on stage. Victor's choice at the end is the climax both of an ideological conflict -- the assertion of certain values against those of Walter -- and an ontological conflict -- the endorsement, after a mood of despair, of his own identity, and the denial of Walter's new identity. In the Sartrean world of *The Price* each son struggles so determinedly because not only is his version of the past at stake but also his very being.

In the play Miller also attempts, successfully I believe, to bridge the individual and the social, to endow the brothers' opposition with both the lived intensity of the uniquely personal and the representativeness of a clash between differing ideologies, or more accurately, between the contradictory strands within a single common ideology. "As the world now operates," he writes in his 'Production Note', "the qualities of both brothers are necessary to it; surely their respective psychologies and moral values conflict at the heart of the social dilemma."¹⁰ 'As the world now operates' refers, presumably to American corporate capitalism and 'the social dilemma' to the general problem (raised by Émile Durkheim in *The Division of Labor in Society*) of how capitalist society is to maintain cohesion and what values and qualities are conducive to the best working of that society. These values and qualities are enshrined within, and propagated by, bourgeois ideology, but the contradictory values -- caring for one another or egotistical success, which the Franz brothers embody and which they attribute to their upbringing, point to an unresolved tension in the value-system.

Liberal individualism, for such I take to be the dominant bourgeois ideology, seeks at one and the same time to pay homage to both the individual and the collectivity. On the one hand, it legitimates the individual's unfettered pursuit of his own personal and economic ends through such values as freedom, excellence and success (vide Walter), and on the other, it strives to secure social cohesiveness and a degree of humane culture through such values as mercy, responsibility and self-abnegation (vide Victor) which act as restraints on that pursuit. Miller cleverly encapsulates this tension in Walter's given profession, medicine, which in America is both a humane, socially beneficial activity and a business, a mode of exploitation and financial self-aggrandisement. So Walter who used to own nursing homes because "there's big money in the aged, you know," now divides his time between his rich private clients and City hospitals. Both sets of qualities and values contribute to the functioning of modern capitalist society, but they ultimately threaten each other and the 'social dilemma' is the maintenance of the optimum balance between them¹¹.

In Jeffersonian individualism the innate sociability of man and Christianity were relied upon for the instilment of humane virtues and the inhibi-

tion of anti-social egotistical gain. But in postwar America there is no faith in innate sociability and Christianity has lost its moral authority. Consequently, the restraint necessary to counter *laissez-faire* individualism together with the communal values necessary to maintain society have to come from elsewhere. Since, as instanced by Miller in the Franz brothers, two sets of values are present in, or can be abstracted from, the culture, the individual has to choose between them, and there are no guidelines to indicate the 'better' choice. Men are thus forced into the responsibility of making choices and asserting personal value, so causing anguish within themselves and conflict with other men. It is the overall balance of these asserted values, the distribution of emphasis between the individual and the family and social group, that ultimately determines the character and the degree of cohesion or atomism of the society at large. This highly economical and tightly crafted play then is at its most Sartrean in its suggestion that the problems of existential choice and the social order are intimately bound together.

NOTES

1. **The Price:** (London, 1969), p.84. All subsequent page references are included in the text and are to this edition. In 1958 Miller could still write of the fearful aspects of the Depression in terms of a bewildering external force: "Nobody could escape that disaster... Out there were the big gods, the ones whose disfavor could turn a proud and prosperous and dignified man into a frightened shell of a man whatever he thought of himself, and whatever he decided or didn't decide to do, "The Shadows of the Gods" collected in **The Theater Essay Miller** edited by Robert A. Martin (New York, 1978).
2. "If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who choose to say that it is good and not bad". Jean-Paul Sartre, **Existentialism and Humanism**, translated by Philip Mairet (London, 1948), p. 31.
3. Esther contributes her own sense of the fraud and unreality of their existence: "We've been lying away our existence all these years... No wonder it seemed like a dream to me - it was; a goddammed nightmare. I knew it was all unreal" (p.106).
4. **Existentialism**, p.34; "The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders, "Existentialism, p.29.
5. Solomon links the permanence of the furniture to the cessation of possibilities and the fixity of a chosen state of existence (p.40).
6. As both Hayman and Bigsby do.
7. "The value of things, their instrumental role, their proximity and real distance... do nothing more than outline my image-that is, my choice. My clothing (a uniform or a lounge suit, a soft or starched shirt)... everything which is mine.. - all this informs me of my choice.. that is, my being". Sartre, **Being and Nothingness**, p. 463.
8. **Existentialism**, p. 29. My emphasis.
9. "A man recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself". Sartre, **Existentialism**, p. 45.
10. Willet mistakenly questions this assertion and denies the play's claim to any social reference.
11. Walter alludes to their interdependence: "It's almost as though... we're like two halves of the same guy. As though we can't quite move ahead - alone" (p.110).

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