

**Ecdysis: A Study of the Dislocated American Frontier in Arthur Miller's The Misfits**

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**Abstract**

*The paper attempts to study the subversion of the idea of material progress of America by the modern American play 'The Misfits' by Arthur Miller. The endeavor that has been conceived aims explore the idea of the frontier as a geographic locale in contradistinction to its socio-spatial aspect. The Frontier will be examined here both, as a literal physical structure and as an abstract embodiment of the values it has been promoting metaphorically since the inception of the American Dream. This will help in testing the hypothesis as to how the superior political profile of America in world affairs is put to suspension in the play so as to visibly critique the alienation of America's founding mythic paradigms- Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. The American Frontier here serves as a paradigm. It is speculated that through the very creation as well as the mythic adaptation of the American Frontier, Miller attempts to endorse a universal cleansing and thereby look at the act of discovering self- knowledge vis-à-vis the characters in the play.*

**Keywords:** frontier, alienation, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity etc.

Arthur Miller's 'The Misfits' might not convey much in the very first reading of the play. The first reading might only render a reader irritated with the questions of how and why would Miller take a recourse to a purely domestic setting of romance seeking, when the world was being plagued by enfeebling wars. The play initially comes out as distanced from the larger world; as if it is trying to escape the meaningless world. However, this interpretation would be downright injustice to the play. One of the reasons why the play in the first attempt fails to create an impression is a direct consequence of it being inter- textual. As Miller himself says in the introduction to it, this work can neither be called a play, nor a script and also not a novel; while also simultaneously it can be called all the three. It is as if one genre keeps dissolving the boundaries of the other and we get an "unfamiliar form" (ix).

The play is set in Reno, Nevada; which is popularly also known as the divorce capital. It is this "leave- it state" (26) that brings together the main characters- Roslyn, Gay, Perce and

Guido. Despite coming from different walks of life, that one commonality amongst them is that they have all had a troubled past. They are all victims of jilted love affairs or have been deceived by their own family members and in some cases even abandoned by their own parents. There is an impending sense of successive loss right from the beginning of the play. The loss is incognito but its going away is constantly drenching the characters into melancholia. It is this inner sense of loss and hollowness that they all try fabricate with their adventurous refashioning of themselves. The play is definitely impressionistic with a deployment of extensive symbols, which also gives it a bitter- sweet, poetic idyllic. Even so, the play is heavily placed with an overriding element of melodrama.

Right from the endless sobs of Roslyn to Gay losing his calm over smallest of events, one feels things are a bit over- done. It is almost as if life has become more of a doleful existence than a short- lived essence. There is always an attempt to imbue the hollow, numb life with excessive feelings so that the inner melancholic wounds remain buried forever. This is this vantage perspective that I would use to further my arguments about the dislocation of the frontier in the play. The characters are always up for adventures. Stability is appalling to them because it transports them to a meaningless void. The aspiration to be a frontier, to a degree, comes from this fear and the remaining of it is, I feel, a consequence of the erasure of the idea of a frontier from the American culture that was taking place around that time.

It was in 1890, after the land rush of Oklahoma in 1889, that the frontier was officially closed. The frontier, more than serving to protect the heart of America, had served to create America in the first place. It was through the frontier that a large population of Europeans came to settle in America. It is worth wondering how the frontier led the dual duties, both antithetical to each other, for so long. The play, does the same with the idea of the frontier. Miller constructs this frontier as a ground of contestation. He exploits the idea to an extent where “savagery” and the “civilized” come to co- incide in the personification of a frontier, as even Turner says in his thesis on frontier. He revisits the frontier who had almost been erased from the history of American culture. This revision is done by subverting the trope of the heroic, by upholding the hero as an oxymoronic figure. The play offers us three hero- sketches rather than one. All the three have a dynamic foundation. They keep fluctuating between the Promethean and the Faustian roles of the hero. Miller was possibly aware of the image he was creating and he deliberately does not strike a balance between the two extremities in any of the three male- leads.

Miller in his interviews has often talked about the creation of an image, which he also does in the introduction to the play. He says how he intended to structure the play as a series of images. The play was inspired by the real life cow boys he met a few years before he wrote the play. However, he says the play is truth and the cow boys, an imitation of it. He wanted to write it in such a form that the readers would connect more with the created image than with

the actual reality. The impasse that the two world wars, the Korean war and the ongoing Vietnam war had created, would be dodged by the unsettling reality that the play would offer. It would make the tragic and the painful felt again. This is one of the reasons why it would be unmerited to cogently try and align the play with its contemporary cultural, post- cultural, post- modernist movements. The play, being seemingly simplistic in its approach, intends to evoke different imaginations, contradictorily both private and public. It acts as a rejoinder to the identification with individual responsibilities as well as how an individual occupies the central position in serving the masses. It is really not as domestically situated as it seems to be initially.

There is a change that it seeks to bring. John Huoston, the director of the movie adaptation, talks of the play as a change. It is because of the always already present contradictions, that a desire for change is becoming malleable. Everything is in a process of a dialectical formation. Every creation that is taking place in the play has a history of destruction and negation, without which the entry- point to present would be closed. The centre- point of the play is a metaphorical, inter- textual change; which is observed both in terms of the changing landscapes, its regulations as well as the inter- generational, societal changes. We see how it pinches Gay to be referred to as, "Old Gay". Even towards the end, Gay feels as he says that he never changed. It is just the meaning of things and the world around him that did. We need to stop and ask here, is it just the physical mutability and decadence of the body that is taking place, or is it that the ideas that created America in the first place are decaying too? This is the hard hitting crisis of the play. For how long can one clutch to false hopes? It only begets despair. Life is about changes and one needs to keep updating oneself to be accountable. R.W.B. Lewis' comments in his work on the "self- propelling" American Adam fit most suitably here. It necessarily need not mean one has to conform to all changes alike, operating in a political blind spot. In a world rising with the light of capitalism, these adventurous cowboys have adhered to their meager, unstable lives because it is "better than wages".

They could not bring themselves to submit to the dictum of capitalism and it is probably the reason why they move around the frontiers, away from the destructive city that demands submission. However, the irony is that all this time when they thought they had rejected capitalism, they were only serving it most faithfully. The setting of the American Drama before the 1990s is contextualized very well in the work of Chris Westgate where he says, "...drama generally represented the city as the setting for concerns: it was where characters struggled with disrupted lines in class definition or the shift toward commodity capitalism or the loss of the American dream" (2). They never realized the changes capitalism brought and how with it everything became as redundant as mere consumerism. Goldstein in his essay on the play remarks how the title of the play resists the rising evil of capitalism; defying it and refusing to conform to the hostile social- war that capitalism had waged, prohibiting any

other mode of production from operating. It mythically derives from the truth established on the Lands of the American soil by it's ancestors. The idea of non- conformism comes heavily from the belief in self- reliance, which Thoreau talks about, that how only a non- conformist can be a self- reliant person; a true American.

The politico- economic shift that the play is set in is used to mark a paradigmatic shift in the attitudes of the protagonists. They realize towards the end how they had only been operating in the myth of being free, while all the time they were slaving for being the fittest to survive. Miller successfully brings into question the cannibalistic "Social Darwinism" (as Herbert Spenser has coined it) that demands the blood of the other for the life of one. "Nothin' can live unless something dies", as Gay himself says. There is a savage enemy that the protagonists are seen combating with. However, this enemy is not another embodiment. This enemy is within each one of them. They need to confront their respective devils to be accountable to their ancestral American land. The geographic frontier serves as a ground of contestation to create a new, human frontier that America needs in these changing times. The play is about the qualification and validation of this paradoxical hero.

I believe Roslyn's character here serves to be highly pivotal in creating this new hero. She is constantly seen interacting with the three male characters. All the characterizations here are made using contradictions, but Roslyn's is the most contradicted. Miller's characterization of Roslyn is quite subtly witty. The first impression of Roslyn is only as the epitome of the 'feminine', a woman who longs to be loved and supported by a faithful man, a woman who has the "gift of life". She is someone who cannot say no to people and rarely when she does, it is done in a ludicrous, seductive and an infantilizing manner. We see in this process how she submits to the wishes of all the three men, as if she is obliged to keep them happy. There comes a point of saturation of this feminine portrayal where Roslyn becomes annoying to a reader. It is only in the subsequent reading of the play that we get to know how Miller subverts the idea of the natural as opposed to the cultural here. He uses the prototype of the feminine in the embodiment of Roslyn. It is Roslyn alone, who despite being the emotionally weakest of all, confronts here reality. When asked by Gay about whether she wants kids with him or not, she does not come up with an answer. Surprisingly, she is the mother who metaphorically gives a second birth to the three men, at least visibly to Gay and Perce, if not to Guido. She is the most powerful non- conformist of them all. She is one of the rarest portrayals of the frontier personified in a woman.

The division of labour in the roles of the characters is quite gendered; operating in the masculine- feminine dichotomy but it is also merely a tool of subversion used by Miller. He possibly uses this conventional gendering to show how weakening the past is. Miller, in one of his interviews with Janet Balakian talks of the importance of the past in this play and its

adaptation into a movie. “We kill people we never saw”, Guido tells Roslyn. Perhaps, it is their own introspection of the past that they never visited and are killing it constantly. The more they try to kill their disturbing pasts, the more ferociously it backfires. Only to get a sense of the adventurous brevity, they arrange for their living on uncertainties. They have not attained the consciousness which Roslyn has, which is evident from her hesitant continence when Guido looks at her pictures from the days when she was a night club dancer. She has undergone her re- assessment and is now self- qualified to fight for herself as well as for the others. The uniqueness of the play lies in the fact that it is not just about individual assessment and accountability. The collective is inter- twined with the individual. They cannot be looked at in alienation.

It is this self- awareness that brings out the urgency for a change. It will break the status-quoist environment that has settled in America, as Thoreau’s words on “dwindling” (12) of America carefully capture. This qualification paves way for that one American who stands up and asserts that s(he) will not adhere to the blind faulty principles in the garb of ‘Americanism’. This person is the frontier, whose existence is derived from the rich cultural history but s(he) does not merely operate in a romanticized past. They need to update themselves with the changing times in order to become more accountable and capable than before. Frederick Jackson Turner quite correctly writes this down in his work ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’. He says, “Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”

The scene where they are seen fighting with mustangs or the final duel- like scene of Gay with the mustang is profoundly impressionistic portrayal of them fighting with their own self. The end opens up a space at the frontier where animals and humans alike, can dwell. The notion of a ‘home’ is also very important. They are all, in a way, homeless. Perce was deceived by his own mother who offered him to work on wages on his own land. Guido has a house where he hopes one day he would stay. The house has only come to be a residence of his charred memories from the past with his late- wife. Gay’s belonging to a home is brought out by his children, who could not care to wait and meet him. Roslyn, recently divorced, again has no place to call home. Even a sixty year old Isabelle runs a lodge where she rents out room to people like Roslyn, only to possibly find companions in them for a decaying life. It is almost as if life has been deadened in the “divorce capital of the world”. Relationships hold no meaning. Or perhaps, it is the changing effect of time on people, who no longer can



stay in a relationship. Whatever is left of these relationships is also commodified and plasticized.

It is in light of these dying relationship that the inter- generational relationship between Gay and Roslyn is given a new life towards the end. The melancholy arising from mutability is rejected by this coming together, which is metaphorical at many levels, qualifying the old and the new to be a frontier figure. A place like Nevada, which would only mark the end of all relations, witnesses the genesis of a new love, laying the foundation of a new frontier. The new frontier formed here will again be subjected to the process of ecdysis according to the call of the times.

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<sup>i</sup> Miller, Arthur. *The Misfits*. The Viking Press. 1961

<sup>ii</sup> Jackson Turner, Frederick. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Penguin. 2008

<sup>iii</sup> “The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam”. Refer: W.B. Lewis, Richard. *The American Adam*. University of Chicago Press, 2009

<sup>iv</sup> Westgate, Chris. *Urban Drama: The Metropolis in Contemporary North American Plays*. Palgrave-Macmillan. 2011

<sup>v</sup> Goldstein, Lawrence. “The Misfits and American Culture” *Arthur Miller’s America: Theatre and Culture in a time of Change*. The University of Michigan Press. 2005

<sup>vi</sup> Miller, Arthur. *The Collected Essays of Arthur Miller*. Bloomsbury Publishing. 2016

<sup>vii</sup> “The past is really the stubbornest problem of mankind. This is interesting to me because a lot of our contemporary drama deals with characters who have no past. It’s probably the nature of the film form which after all is the single great cultural invention of this civilization”

<sup>viii</sup> “The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow- one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self- reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the almshouses is in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund to the support of the widows and orphans that may be, who; in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently” Refer: Thoreau, Henry David. *Civil Disobedience*. Mozambook. 2001.

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