

The Psychosexual Element in Miller's "A View from the Bridge"

Dr. ITISHRI SARANGI
Assistant Professor
KIIT University
India

Abstract:

Eddie's desire for his niece Catherine makes him a pathetic figure. Eddie although understands the ethics of his community, outrages them, betrays his wife and violates the moral code. Love is one of the most confusing emotions that one can ever perceive. Catherine is a naive woman who has not experienced much of it, and is eager to. She is grown up in a warm nurturing environment, and is truly an innocent and open character. Eddie's flaw is his obsessive love for Catherine. The paternal over protectiveness of Eddie towards Catherine breaks the family apart. In order to protect her from outside elements, he himself became her sexual predator, the desire was in his mind, which was not fully realized. The growing up of Catherine, her feminine maturity is a threat. Eddie's reaction to the grown-up girl is an affection turned into "incestuous desires."

Key words: Over protectiveness, desire, sexual inclination, incest, family instability.

"Somewhere in the blood you have a play and you wait until it passes behind the eyes," says Miller in an interview (*The Theatre Essays* 29-30). Miller wrote *A View from the Bridge* as a direct response to the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) set up in America. Miller was suspected of being a communist sympathizer, but refused to name his other suspected friends. On the other hand, Elia Kazan, one of the friends of Miller, named the suspected communists to the

HUAC. Miller was outraged by his friend's act. In *A View From the Bridge*, Eddie Carbone in fact represents Kazan. Miller considers Kazan's act as a shameful betrayal. On the other hand, *On the Waterfront* by Eliza Kazan is said to be the response to Miller's commentary in *A View from the Bridge*.

A View from the Bridge is based on a true story. Miller was researching on a dockworker named Pate Panto, who was executed while attempting to revolt on a union. Miller came across another tale about a longshoreman, who tried to prevent his niece from marrying one of his brothers and the same man informed the immigration bureau about his relatives. However, the man soon disappeared and was rumored to be killed by one of his brothers. Miller however wanted to avoid pure naturalism or realism in relating this story. "In writing this play originally I obeyed the impulse to indicate, to telegraph, so to speak, rather than to explore and exploit what at finest had seemed to me the inevitable and therefore unnecessary emotional implication of the conflict" ("Introduction" 50). The play is about Eddie Carbone, a sexually repressed dockworker who commits an act of betrayal and is alienated by his community. The earlier version of *A View from the Bridge* (1955) was a one-act play. Miller was somehow not satisfied with it. The two-act version is longer than the original version. In the London opening (1956), the play was in two-acts. The second version of the *A View from the Bridge* was included in the *Collected Plays*.

Miller himself describes the story behind the one-act version of *A View from the Bridge* as a "re-enactment of a Greek myth." The major change according to Miller was to amplify the role of Eddie's wife to make the second play "not only more human, warmer and less remote but also a clearer statement" (Martin 222). Miller, in the second version, drew both Beatrice's and Catherine's characters and their relationship with Eddie more intelligently. Catherine even seems to be more critical of Beatrice in the second version. Catherine is more original, straightforward and direct, compared to the original version of

the play. "The present version is a better play, I think, but not that much better; and the sharp difference between the impressions each of the productions created has a bearing on many themes that have been treated here" ("Introduction" 48). Miller himself calls this play as a drama psychosexual romanticism. The *View* was a result of Miller's desire to create a direct, unembroidered play that simply presented the situation and left it alone.

The reception of *View* was actually a good deal better than I judged at the time and that lodged in my memory... Perhaps it was also a negative memory because something in me was disowning the play even as its opening approached. I was turning against myself, struggling to put my life behind me, order and disorder at war in me, in a kind of parallel of the stress between the play's formal, cool classicism and the turmoil of incestuous desire and betrayal within it (*Timebends* 356). The setting of *A View from the Bridge* is a New York slum area, far away from the world of glamour and grandeur of *Death of a Salesman*. "View came under Brook's direction a heroic play of great emotional force, the working-class character, larger than life, grand and rather strange" (*Timebends* 431). The Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York a city where Eddie lived was a community of Italian and Sicilian immigrants. From the vantage point on the Bay seaward, Miller's characters visualize their lives and the world to which they belong, from the Brooklyn Bridge.

Family is central in this play like any other play of Miller. The hero, Eddie Carbone is also a failed husband as John Proctor in *The Crucible*. Eddie Carbone destroys his family out of jealousy, rejects his wife Beatrice for the sake of his niece, Catherine, and accuses Rodolpho, the lover of Catherine, of homosexuality. "Certainly Eddie Carbone's semiconscious desire for his niece, his frigidity towards his wife and the possibility of his latent homosexuality, gives greater emphasis to the psychosexual factors than any previous Miller drama" (Nelson 214). Eddie promised his sister to take care of

his niece. It is Eddie who brought up Catherine and is a Godfather to her. In order to protect her from outside elements, he himself became her sexual predator. The desire was in his mind, which was not fully realized. The growing up of Catherine, her feminine maturity is a threat. Now Eddie's reaction to the grown-up girl is an affection turned into "incestuous desires." The over protectiveness of Eddie towards Catherine has become a threat to Beatrice, who anticipates the impending consequences. Beatrice warns Catherine to behave like a grown-up girl.

Beatrice: Because you think you're a baby. I told you fifty times already, you can't act the way you are. You still walk around in front of him in your slip(...)Well you can't do it. Or like you sit on the edge of the bathtub talkin' to him when he's shavin' in his underwear.(405)

Beatrice has clearly become a neglected wife. Her daughter substitute becomes her rival. Beatrice descends down to confront Catherine. Beatrice is shown in the play as a mature female figure who confronts Catherine. There is marital rift between Eddie and Beatrice. The paternal over-protectiveness of Eddie alarms Beatrice as she finds there is something wrong in their relationship. The confrontation of Beatrice with Catherine reflects bitterness and agony of the post-depressional period. "Beatrice makes a more determined fight than before to alter her status quo" (Hayman 57). Catherine is eighteen, yet Eddie feels she has not grown up and treats her as if she is a baby. Eddie dislikes and objects to Catherine's dress code. Eddie says Catherine that she looks beautiful, but he is disturbed by all the attention the boys are giving her in the community and wants Catherine to stop waving out the window and be more reserved.

Catherine achieves her adulthood after the arrival of Marco and Rodolpho. Her growing attraction to Rodolpho, which leads to their plan for marriage, brings out an aggressive reaction in Eddie that starts to break the family apart.

Catherine becomes more rebellious and independent and Beatrice becomes increasingly frustrated as she realizes how events will go." Catherine is sandwiched between her love for Rodolpho and the loyalty she owes to his uncle. Now she wishes to escape Eddie's influence for a positive change in her life. Eddie's interest in Catherine is something more than paternal. "Eddie: With your hair that way you look like a Madonna, you know that? You're the Madonna type ... You wanna go to work, heh, Madonna? (386)."

Eddie is ready to go to any extent, for the sake of Catherine. To his awe, in his effort he loses love of Catherine. Eddie's close relationship is destroyed by his endless criticism against Rodolpho, and in the process, he isolates himself. Catherine receiving Eddie's unusual attention towards her decides to become independent and take her own decisions. She now does not want to stay with Eddie who wants to keep Catherine under his influence. "I think I can't stay here no more.....I'm not gonna be a baby any more!" Beatrice supports Catherine and encourages her to be independent, "It means you gotta be your own self" (436). Catherine even calls Eddie a "rat" (436) as a fitting result of his constant resistance towards her marriage with Rodolpho. Beatrice is torn between loyalty to Catherine, whose wedding she feels a duty to attend, and to Eddie, she wishes to stand by him, as all others have deserted him. "Eddie's relationship to Catherine is totally different; for in her his negative "anima" has projected the qualities it does not recognize in itself and has proceeded "to weave fantasies around her" (Von 191).

Catherine is of "Madonna type" (386) according to Eddie. Rodolpho calls her beautiful. The feminine sensibility of Catherine has touched the heart of Eddie. His desire for Catherine makes him a pathetic figure. Eddie although understands the ethics of his community, outrages them, betrays his wife and violates the moral code. Marital relationship is betrayed. The protagonist Eddie tries to seek fulfillment in "other women." The same is true of John Proctor

in *The Crucible*. Eddie's desperate attempt to stop Rodolpho marrying Catherine fails and at last, the situation arises where Eddie draws her towards him and kisses her passionately. The suppressed desire of Eddie is nakedly shown in the kissing scene in Act-II. When Eddie reaches out and kisses on Catherine's mouth the audience feels slightly awkward for this is not a normal relationship between an uncle and a niece and is sheer incest.

The plot of the play is a love-triangle between husband, wife and niece. Alferi, the lawyer, confronts Eddie. Alferi's statement is direct. Eddie is shocked and agitated by Alferi's statement: "... Eddie, I want to listen to me- you know, sometimes God mixes up the people. We all love somebody, the wife, the kids-every man's got somebody that he loves, heh? But sometimes (...) there's too much. You know? There's too much, and it goes where it mustn't. A man works hard, he brings up a child sometimes it's a niece, sometimes even a daughter and he never realizes it, but through the years-there is too much love for the daughter, there is too much love for the niece. Do you understand what I am saying to you? (409)."

Homosexuality was a social taboo and was not discussed publicly. Miller faced problems with the British Theatre for the staging of *A View from the Bridge* because "Eddie Carbone accuses his wife's cousin Rodolpho of homosexuality and to prove it, grabs him and kisses him on the lips. No doubt because it was so widespread, if not yet accepted as commonplace, homosexuality in 1956 could not be referred to directly on the stage" (*Timebends* 429). Eddie has a strict opinion about how men should look, act and behave. He believes men should be strong, the breadwinner of the household and someone who cares for the family. Eddie's over protectiveness shows his manly attributes. Eddie's masculinity is further strengthened when he points out that Rodolpho has blonde hair, cooks, sings, is weak at fighting and makes dresses, which in Eddie's eyes, are characteristic of a typical woman. "Eddie does not understand why he opposes the

marriage so violently, nor do any of the other people who are involved. Searching around for a plausible reason, Eddie convinces himself that the young Italian is a homosexual whose only motive in marrying Catherine is a chance to legitimize his citizenship in America. But Eddie's real motive is the undeclared, unrecognized, unappeased hunger he has for himself. Like the heroes of Greek tragedy, he topples the whole house down on himself in the final catastrophe of a haunted play" (Brooks, *New York Times*. 9.10.1995).

"To hell with Eddie," says Catherine in the prison scene (434). Yet traces of the old love remain to keep Catherine humane. When she learns that Marco is coming to kill Eddie, she pleads with Eddie to save himself (436). Catherine is not a very perceptive girl. Even after Eddie's kiss, she seems blind to his motives. When Beatrice at the end accuses Eddie of incestuous desires, Catherine is horrified (437). Beatrice assures Catherine that she is not jealous of her and conveys her that she is a woman and must make her own decision about marriage. "You think I'm jealous of you, honey? ...You're a woman, that's all, and you got a nice boy, and now the time has come when you said goodbye. All right?" (406). Beatrice believes Catherine's impending womanhood has refracted Eddie's fatherly focus into an inappropriate attachment. Eddie shows his sense of masculinity by demanding respect from Beatrice. Beatrice is a religiously catholic woman who stands by and obeys her husband. She sticks to the womanly job at home, kitchen, knitting and cooking for the family like Linda in *Death of a Salesman*. Beatrice complains of Eddie's sexual impotence and lack of physical affection for her.

Beatrice: When am I gonna be a wife again, Eddie?

Eddie: I ain't been feelin' good. They bother me since they came.

Beatrice: It's almost three months you don't feel good; they're only here couple of weeks. It's three months Eddie.

Eddie's relationship with Beatrice is poor. "It's almost three months," implies their sexual relationship is non-existent. Further, Beatrice is not sure of Eddie's love for her. Eddie is least concerned about the effect of the relationship with Catherine on his marriage. Beatrice is like any other Miller's women who are always helpless and are unable to affect the fate of their husbands. The same is true of Kate in *All My Sons* and Linda in *Death of a Salesman*. Beatrice at some point is a very stable character. When Eddie gives mocking comments about Rodolpho and pursues Beatrice that he is an 'effeminate' Beatrice replies: "So he's blond so (...) You never seen a blond going in your life?" (398).

Eddie's hatred for Marco and Rodolpho is an outburst of his suppressed urge for his niece, Catherine. Rodolpho's motivations are not clearly shown in the play. Eddie's love for Catherine, his sexuality are some of the few unanswered questions in the play. It is also not very clear whether Rodolpho truly loves Catherine or not. To some extent, Eddie might be true that Rodolpho wants to marry Catherine just to gain American citizenship. Eddie tries to protect Catherine from Rodolpho. Watching the growing attraction of Catherine towards Rodolpho, Eddie is forced to confront his own feeling for his niece. The tensions arise and later explode due to Rodolpho who becomes a "Lover boy" of Catherine, as the play progresses.

Beatrice and Catherine are very weak characters in the play. In the second version of *A View from the Bridge*, the women characters were significantly enlarged. Both Beatrice and Catherine are weak characters who are virtually helpless. Neither of the female characters has a significant impact. Catherine is a flighty girl contrasted by Beatrice, a mature woman. Catherine is perhaps a seducer like Abigail in *The Crucible*, to a certain extent. Her innocence is evident when she does not know that it is inappropriate to walk around in a slip in front of her uncle and watch Eddie in his underwear. Catherine seeks independence only when she finds Rodolpho as

another male patriarchal figure to replace him. Only at the end of the second act, we find Beatrice overpowering Eddie and for the first time Eddie seeks out her forgiveness and love. When Eddie kisses Catherine on her mouth, she does not react. Catherine seems to be more critical of Beatrice. She is straightforward and direct than the original version of the play. "If I was a wife I would make a man happy instead of going at him all the time. I can tell a block away then he's blue in his mind and just want to talk to somebody quiet and nice... I can tell when he's hungry or wants beer before he even says anything. I know when his feet hurt him. I mean I know him and now I'm supposed to turn around and make a stranger out of him, I don't know why I have to do that, I mean (421)."

Catherine's love for his uncle is filial. From the discussion of Catherine with Rodolpho, it seems that Catherine is obliged to her uncle. She is too familiar with Eddie. Now that she has grown up, she knows that she owes a lot to him.

Catherine: It's only that I... He was good to me. You don't know him; he was always the sweetest guy to me. Good. He razzes me all the time but he don't mean it. I know, I would---- just feel ashamed if I made him sad. 'Cause I always dreamt that when I got married he would be happy at the wedding and laughin' – and now he is mad all the time and nasty – she is weeping Tell him you'd live in Italy-just tell him, and may be he would start to trust you a little, see? Because I want him to be happy; I mean-I like him Rodolpho-and can't stand it! (420).

"Catherine cannot be held responsible for an erotic power that is inherent in her identity and is, undoubtedly, a defining condition of femaleness itself; and that Beatrice sees and understands but is unable to intervene in halting the course of events." (Alter 132-133) At last, Eddie dies declaring his love for his wife. "Catherine: Eddie I never meant to do nothing bad to you. Eddie: Then why – Oh, B! Beatrice: Yes, Yes! Eddie: My B!" He dies in her arms and Beatrice covers him with her body... (439). Eddie's relation with Catherine in the final scene

is of secondary importance. Love is one of the most confusing emotions that one can ever perceive. Catherine is a naive woman who has not experienced much of it, and is eager to. Her relation with Rodolpho could be a virgin experience of her love. She is grown up in a warm nurturing environment, and is truly an innocent and open character. Eddie's flaw in the play is his obsessive love for Catherine. The catalyst that brings this out in him is the relationship between Rodolpho and Catherine. As he dies, Beatrice and Catherine stay with him, the two women he loved. Eddie has no one to blame but himself for his downfall. The ethics of marriage has become a mockery although at the end he realizes that it is not Catherine but Beatrice who is most important in his life.

REFERENCE

- Alter, Iska. "Betrayal and Blessedness." *Feminist Reading of Modern American Drama*. NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989.
- Brooks, Atkinson. "A View From the Bridge." *New York Times*. October 9, 1995,
- Hayman, Ronald. *Arthur Miller*. London: Heinemann, 1970.
- Martin, Robert. A. *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*. Viking Press: New York, 1978.
- Miller, Arthur. *Collected Plays with an Introduction*. New York: The Viking Press, 1957.
- . *Timebends: A Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1987.
- Murray, Edward. *Arthur Miller Dramatist..* New York: Ungar, 1967.
- Nelson, Benjamin. *Arthur Miller. Portrait of a Playwright*. Peter Owen: London, 1970.
- Tim, Bezant. "Introduction." *A View from the Bridge*. London: Heinemann, 1995.
- Von, Franz. "The Process of Individuation." *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Dell, 1972.