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It's hard to be anything

Will May explores difference and identity in Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass*

Phillip Gellburg and Margaret Hyman, the two characters whose irritable conversation begins Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass* (1994) find themselves defined by and defying particular identities in the opening scene. Phillip, who is waiting for his appointment with Dr. Hyman discovers that Hyman's wife, Margaret, also works as his nurse. Phillip's sceptical amusement suggests a possible conflict between their marital and professional relationship, but Margaret's good-humoured response refutes this. Meanwhile Phillip is repeatedly questioned by Margaret about the pronunciation of his surname, a seemingly incidental detail which will become increasingly important as the play unfolds. Phillip's defensive spelling out of his surname literally spells out the theme of identity that will be so central to the play as a whole.

People are people

The three primary settings in the play are the Gellburg's family home, Dr. Hyman's surgery, and Stanton Case's office. This theatrical canvas allows Miller to examine his characters in a variety of socially defined roles. Throughout the play, Miller seems to be arguing that individuals thrive on having a range of social interaction. Many of the difficulties Sylvia and Phillip are experiencing in their relationship seem to date back to Phillip's insistence that his wife gave up working after they married. By limiting the range of 'identities' available to Sylvia, she eventually feels stripped of any identity whatsoever – "I'm here for my mother's sake, and Jerome's sake and everybody's sake expect mine", she cries in despair in Scene Two. She is reduced to the role of daughter and mother (tellingly, she leaves wife out of the equation, for reasons which we'll explore later), and her psychosomatic paralysis which continues throughout the play becomes a symbol of her anxiety about her place in the world.

Phillip himself, whose career and marriage both come under threat over the course of the play, seems similarly conflicted. He describes both his wife and his boss as his "whole life" at various points in the play, suggesting his need to cling to one particular social identity rather than allow himself to play a number of roles. His final conflict with his boss arises from the insinuation he is friends with the property developer Allen Kershowitz, another example of Phillip struggling to integrate his personal and professional life.

We witness the reverse of Phillip's predicament through the character of Dr. Hyman, whose close relationships with the other characters frequently undermine his role as a professional, ideally detached, observer. As his wife Margaret warns him, Sylvia is "a very beautiful woman" (Scene Two), and Hyman's increasing fascination with her often serves to exacerbate her problems even as it diagnoses them. The dangerous ease with which a patient becomes an object of desire is typified by the scene in which Hyman asks Sylvia to imagine they've just made love, a request which hovers between the medical and the carnal.

Lying bodies

Sexual prowess and fulfilment also defines and demarcates the characters in Miller's theatrical world. Both Sylvia and Harriet are intrigued and provoked by Hyman's past sexual conquests, and Hyman himself is quick to pathologise Sylvia's "hysterical paralysis" by tracing back the word hysteria to its Greek origin of womb. Even Hyman's own name, which recalls that of the Greek goddess of marriage, Hymen, highlights his character's belief in a vital, sexually active, partnership. Hyman locates the cause of Sylvia's illness in her sexless marriage with Phillip, describing her as a woman "desperate to be loved" (Scene Eight). Her enforced paralysis comes to represent her own ambivalence about herself as a sexual being.

Phillip, too, is concerned with how his sexual status makes him appear to the world. He is frequently evasive or misleading about his sexual relationship with his wife, to the extent that, in Scene Six, he fabricates a night-time encounter which his wife has apparently erased from her memory. Their sexless marriage comes to typify the stultifying sense of isolation and stasis present throughout the play. As Sylvia wistfully

remarks, "I guess you just gradually give up and it closes over you like a grave" (Scene Eight).

Yet if one of Miller's central concerns is with the breakdown of Sylvia and Phillip's sexual relationship, he is careful not to oversimplify the matter. Virility seems to be preferable to impotence, if we are to take Hyman and Phillip as archetypes, but we learn from Hyman's admissions to his wife that he may have been unfaithful to Margaret during their marriage. It is also interesting to note that many of Hyman's comments about his own sexual life are as equivocal as Phillip's. When Phillip announces that he's "no Rudolph Valentino", Hyman counters that "Rudolph Valentino probably wasn't either" (Scene Two), suggesting that his own reputation as a sexual magnet may not be as fitting as it seems.

Hyman's own marital relationship is marked by open and intimate communication. Yet his preoccupation with Sylvia is often a source of dramatic tension in the play, seen most clearly through his increasingly erotic descriptions of her paralysed body which attempt to arouse her into recovery. If sexual desire is something that can help sustain and maintain a successful union, it can also threaten it.

Cultural identities

Yet marital intimacy is not something that Miller treats in isolation. Throughout the play, Miller makes his audience understand Sylvia and Phillip's relationship through the lens of their Jewish culture. Both characters have a complex attitude towards their Jewishness. Throughout the play, Phillip is eager to differentiate himself from other Jewish people, taking pride in the fact that he is the first Jewish employer of Brooklyn Guarantee and that his son will be one of the first Jewish generals in the American army. Even when he explains he is originally from Finland in the opening scene of the play, he is hostile to Margaret's suggestion that he would be interested in identifying himself within a larger, Finnish-American group of Jewish people. He is also quick to defend the apparent anomaly of being both Jewish and Republican, arguing that he does not define himself by his ethnic identity. Yet, as later becomes clear in the play, Phillip is suppressing an

important part of who he is, and later confesses a desire to "going and sitting in the Schul with the old men and pulling the *tallis* over my head" (Scene Eleven).

Miller allows to us to understand this suppression on a linguistic level as well. Throughout the play, Phillip's character is offered Yiddish vocabulary, primarily by Hyman. Yet whilst it is clear from their exchanges that Phillip understands phrases such as "*Tuschas offen tisch*" and "dybbuk" (Scene One), he is always careful to 'translate' these phrases into English in his replies. Only in the final scene, with his pointed use of the word "*tallis*", does Phillip finally embrace this important part of his culture.

We understand Sylvia's psychological condition both as a response to her husband's attitude and the increasingly violent persecution of Jewish people in Nazi Germany. Throughout her period of paralysis, she pores over the newspaper images of Jewish people cleaning the streets with toothbrushes in Germany, incensed in equal measures by the fact of what is happening and the rest of the world's refusal to intervene. Phillip tries to brush off the growing tide of anti-Semitism, remarking early on in the play that American newspapers ought not to publish the pictures, but through Sylvia's increasing obsession with the images we come to understand Phillip's attitude as one that leads to self-denial and self-hatred.

The image of broken glass that gives the play its title serves to underline the centrality of Phillip's conflict with his Jewish identity. The shattered windows of Jewish shop fronts in Nazi Germany echo Phillip's use of a glass mirror for his habitual self-examination. Only by looking again, and turning the mirror outwards, Miller suggests, can Phillip begin to see a more hopeful reflection of the future.

Assimilation and negation

Yet if Philip's central identity crisis seems to relate to his Jewishness, Miller makes this less black and white than the horrific newspaper images of 1930s Germany that his wife finds so disturbing. Miller complicates the issue of Philip's ethnic and cultural identity through Hyman's liberal relativism. In the penultimate scene of the play, Hyman argues that all groups in society are persecuted, and Margaret's earlier description of Phillip

himself as a dictator links him briefly with Hitler, suggesting the impossibility of fixing either a group or an individual identity.

It is worth asking then how far we should see Hyman's pragmatic perspective as Miller's final word on identity. The play is set just after *Kristallnacht* in Germany (8-9 November, 1938), when Nazi stormtroopers rampaged through cities in Germany and Austria destroying buildings with sledgehammers and leaving the streets covered in the shattered glass of smashed windows. Anti-Semitism in America was still a topic rarely discussed while Britain followed a programme of appeasement towards Nazi Germany. This historical context suggests a contrary perspective. Miller may be challenging us to think: if there is a time to surrender the shackles or expectations of a culturally or socially prescribed identity, is there also a time for unilateral action and collective responsibility?

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