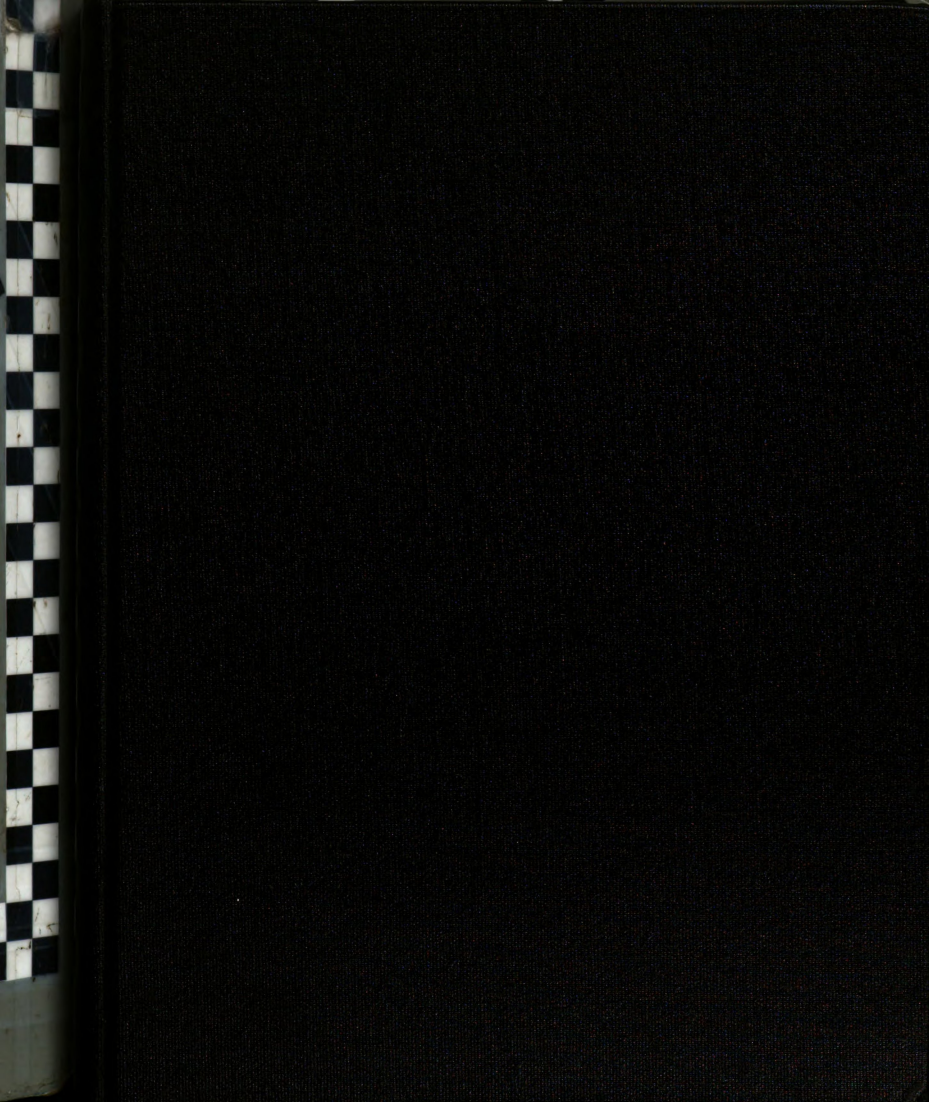




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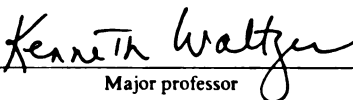
Arthur Miller: Popular Front Playwright

presented by

Brant L. Pope

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in American Studies


Major professor

Date September 26, 2002



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ARTHUR MILLER: POPULAR FRONT PLAYWRIGHT

By

Brant L. Pope

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of American Studies

2003

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Abstract

ARTHUR MILLER: POPULAR FRONT PLAYWRIGHT

By

Brant L. Pope

As an individual who has always been heavily involved in the political life of the nation, Arthur Miller serves as an excellent example of how the interrelationship between social, political, and economic forces influenced the ideas of liberal artists and intellectuals, especially during the decade of the 1930's. This study examines the evolution of the political ideas of Miller as manifested in his unpublished plays and writings, and the role these ideas played in the plots, themes and characters of his published works. The study of the politics of Arthur Miller is significant not only because it offers insights into his plays, but also because it illuminates a particularly important period of American intellectual history. Miller's unpublished plays are closely examined to determine the extent to which he has retained, and incorporated into his work, important aspects of the political energy of the literary left in the late 1930's, a worldview I am characterizing as Popular Front radicalism. The dissertation argues that, despite significant growth in his artistic skill as a playwright, Miller has never significantly departed from this political perspective. His plays therefore are challenges to the presumptive myths of American society and the dissertation concludes by offering specific examples of how understanding the particular nature of Miller's radicalism can influence artistic choices in the staging of his plays.

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I would like to express my thanks to many people who have provided invaluable support to me in completing this dissertation. To my doctoral committee, especially Peter Levine and Ken Waltzer, thank you for the insight, wisdom, and patience you have demonstrated. The assistance of the friendly and expert staff at the Ransom Library at the University of Texas was most important to me. Special thanks to Pam Conner at the FSU/Asolo Conservatory who provided not only help on this project but also ten years of friendship and encouragement. I thank my beloved parents Myrna and Robert, who gave me a love of learning and took special joy in my choosing a career in the theatre. Above all, I express my love and appreciation to my wife Barbara and daughter Olivia. Without their love and understanding, I could not have completed this work.

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CHAPTER ONE

GROWING UP DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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As one of America's greatest playwrights, Arthur Miller has been the subject of numerous articles and books involving virtually every aspect of his career. Excellent critical studies examine his writing style and the importance of his career to the American theatre and playwriting in general. Miller has also given freely of his own time for extensive interviews regarding his life and his perceptions of his own work. Perhaps most valuable of all are the many writings by the playwright himself spanning fifty years and culminating in his 1987 autobiography, *Timebends*. In short, the ground is fairly well saturated for new studies of a man who first came to national attention in 1945 and is still, at this writing, making his mark on the intellectual and artistic life of the nation. In fact in the two years immediately preceding this work, Broadway audiences have witnessed the revivals of five Miller plays and Minnesota's famed Tyrone Guthrie Theatre is currently staging the playwright's newest play, *Resurrection Blues*.

What has remained largely unexamined, however, is the period from 1936, when Miller wrote his first play, to 1947 when *All My Sons* appeared on Broadway. Virtually all writers refer to the impact the Great Depression had on the young Miller. Many also identify Miller's "left-wing politics" as having their origins in the 1930's, but no real attention has been paid to the content or evolution of the political ideas of Miller as manifested in his unpublished plays and writings. ¹ My purpose in writing is to examine these early works and attempt to find the importance of Miller's political ideas and the role they played in the plots and themes of his published works. The goal is to determine what things account for the intellectual and artistic

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preoccupations that prompt Miller to conceive of his plays and to create his stories and characters. Focusing on Miller's politics and his writing means that I will not attempt to examine the plays in terms of their artistic merit, dramatic structure or production history, but rather to explore the relationship of Miller's politics and his art.

As an individual who has always been heavily involved in the politics of the nation, Miller serves as an excellent example of how social, political and economic forces influenced the ideas of liberal artists and intellectuals, especially during the 1930's. This study examines the evolution of Miller's political ideas as manifested in his unpublished plays and writings and the role they played in the plots and themes of his published works. The study of the politics of Arthur Miller is significant because it offers insights into his plays and also because it illuminates a particularly important period of American intellectual history. I examine Miller's plays in an effort to determine the extent to which he retained (and incorporated into his work) important aspects of the political energy of the literary Left in the late 1930's, a worldview I characterize as "Popular Front radicalism."

Arthur Miller is an excellent subject for an American Studies dissertation because his art cannot be fully appreciated without grasping how his thematic preoccupations have their origins in a very particular period. Indeed it is impossible to separate his works from his politics. Placing him in historical context provides significant insight into his plays, while also illuminating a fascinating period in American intellectual

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history. What Miller writes about and the social and political point of view embedded in these preoccupations have their origins in the Popular Front period. Further, the opportunity to examine an entire body of Miller's original, unpublished plays, letters, diaries and other materials from the period 1935-1946 has been made available to me by Mr. Miller and this has provided invaluable understanding of what the young artist was thinking and feeling during those years.

The biography of Arthur Miller reveals the unique interaction of several factors that resulted in his reputation as the most politically minded of the major playwrights in American theatrical history. First, he was a second generation descendent, on his father's side, of East European Jewish immigrants to New York. This heritage affected Miller particularly in the passionate support given by his parents for his pursuit of a college education and the pursuit of the American dream as well as his exposure to what Miller himself called "the fierce idealism and longing for the pure and intellectually elegant argument" that he saw as the Jewish tradition. ² Second, his family was drastically affected by the Depression in ways that left life-long scars on the mind and soul of the young Miller. Finally, he came to adulthood in the mid 1930's, attended college during the hey day of the Popular Front and intellectually identified himself with socio-political causes most closely associated with ideas put forward by writers and artists of the political Left. In examining Miller's developing political consciousness during the period, therefore, one can both trace the origins of his later work and also place him in the larger currents of American intellectual history.

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“Through no fault or effort of mine,” Miller said in 1958, “the Depression was the ground upon which I learned to stand.”³ It was not only the crash itself to which Miller is referring, but the way in which the economic disaster changed the personal life of the fourteen- year old boy and everything he thought he understood (at 14) about life. As Miller relates in *Timebends*, he was born in 1915 to a virtually illiterate Jewish immigrant father and a mother who, despite her life-long contempt for her in-laws, was the granddaughter of Jews from the very same village in what is now Poland. Isidore Miller came to America at the age of six and worked and lived with his five siblings and parents in a two-room tenement where they constructed long, black coats. Young Isidore’s job was to sew on the many buttons.

The story of the rise and fall of Isidore’s fortunes was to have a profound impact on the emotional life of his son. Through skill and diligence, the family founded the coat manufacturing firm S. Miller and Sons, and Isidore played a leading role in its growth and development. By the 1920’s Isidore broke away and founded his own enterprise, Miltex Coat and Suit Company. So profitable was this firm that the Millers were considered wealthy by the time Arthur was seven. Despite his inability to read or write any language, the elder Miller built the business into one of the two or three largest coat manufacturers in the United States for a period in the 1920’s.

Many of the stories and character relationships that we now associate with Miller, including the timeless brilliance of the father-son encounters in his plays, have their

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origins in the Miltex Coat and Suit Company and were largely crafted from Miller's complex relationship with his own businessman father. Three of his unpublished plays, plus his masterworks, *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, have business as the primary environment in which the stories take place. Abe Simon, the main character in three of the unpublished plays, plus Joe Keller in *All My Sons* and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, are all businessmen struggling to achieve happiness and success. Like Isidore Miller, all three men were the fathers of two sons. Also, like Isidore Miller, all three men have dedicated their lives to the business so that they might pass on something to their sons. Yet rather than bringing them joy, the business becomes a source of anguish for the fathers as their sons, like Arthur Miller himself, reject their parent's life philosophy and refuse the inheritance.

The family of Miller's mother, Augusta Barnett, was also in the business world. Her father, Louis, was a contractor who founded a men's clothing company (seen by many in the industry as more secure and prestigious than a company making women's garments) that he built into a moderately prosperous business. Barnett, unlike anyone else in Miller's family, was a deeply religious man who spoke Yiddish and slept with his white silk yarmulke on his head. Augusta, who was born on Broom Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, was educated, well read and considered herself and her family to be superior to her successful but virtually illiterate husband. In *Timebends*, Miller relates how much of this underlying conflict was dampened by the prosperity the Miller family experienced during the decade of the 1920's.

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Neither Isidore nor Augusta Miller was prepared for the economic disaster that hit them in 1929. Arthur Miller describes his family as prosperous and absolutely non-political in the years leading up to the 1929 Crash. The catastrophic impact of the Depression on the fourteen- year old Miller cannot be exaggerated especially since he experienced it so profoundly and personally. It was not only the financial degradation of his family and the failure of the American dream that shocked Miller, but also the psychological unmasking of his parent's true feelings about each other once they were deprived of their economic and social status. With the sensitive soul of a future artist, Miller was wrenched from his previous ideas of himself, his place in the world, and the meaning of his parent's lives. What really "crashed" for Miller was everything in which he had previously believed as well as the people who represented those beliefs.

On the eve of the Depression, Isidore Miller was driven to work in a company car and Augusta often brought her children in a limousine driven by a chauffeur to visit the bustling complex. The young Miller loved the feeling that all the workers were "filled with respect and a kind of congratulation for being who we were, the sons of the boss and our pretty and clever mother." ⁴ The Miller family represented the achievement of the American dream. They had acquired wealth and social status by working their way up from nothing, besting the competition and giving to their children a style of life not available to themselves when they were children. In 1928, the family moved to Brooklyn amidst a building boom across the East River bridges into a large house befitting the owner of a prosperous company.

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When the Crash hit, the Miller's were one of the first families in their neighborhood to feel its effects. Miller details in *Timebends* the effect on him when three men later committed suicide on the small block containing his family's house. Isidore conducted a valiant, but futile campaign to save his business, as did Augusta's father with his company. By the mid-1930's they were all huddled together in the Brooklyn house that Miller's father desperately struggled to keep. With the family business gone and the savings account emptied, Miller approached his college years realizing there was no money left to support him. For several years, he worked in series of working-class jobs to finance his entrance to college. After two tries, Miller was accepted to the University of Michigan in 1933.

The University of Michigan had achieved national prominence for three things; namely, academic excellence, a radical reputation and a willingness to accept Jews. Perhaps it was some aspect of Miller's family experience with the Depression that predisposed him while at the University to certain "radical" activities. At the age where it is most natural for a young man to feel somewhat rebellious anyway and to react with cynicism to the slightest hint of inconsistency or hypocrisy in adults, Miller lived with the collapse of his family's fortunes. Although Miller has never overtly stated such a thing, one might speculate that his level of outrage (expressed in his plays) and rejection of his parents values were at least in part because he was unconsciously trying to discard his own worship of those very same attitudes. Throughout his professional life Miller has created characters that were fully invested

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in both the material world and in rebellion from it. This central autobiographical theme has its origin in the immediate years following the Crash.

Miller was primarily disillusioned not so much by the economic impact of the Depression itself as by the utter moral and spiritual helplessness it seemed to cause in those people closest to him. He watched his own parent's relationship deteriorate into acrimony when the money began to run out and he later admitted to himself that he, at first, joined with his mother in blaming his father for the troubles. His later revulsion that so many Americans faulted themselves for the economic troubles was at least in part fueled by the emotional desire to purge those very tendencies from himself. But again the key point here is that Miller saw that his parent's entire relationship and definitions of themselves were based on economic and social status. What place did love have, Miller might have questioned, in a family if it were predicated on money and what did life then mean if no money was forthcoming? If everything that his father taught him was now proven worthless, how could he maintain his own sense of right and wrong? Miller's well-known moralizing tendencies might just as easily have sprung as much from this emotional pain as any intellectual motivation.

"Practically everything that had been said or done up to 1929," said Miller years later, "turned out to be a fake." ⁵ This was not just an economic or political judgment Miller was making, it was personally felt and experienced. As did countless others in America, Miller watched banks close, strange men come to the door begging for any

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job in exchange for food and well educated men selling ties and apples on the street. But what planted the seeds of radicalism in the young Arthur Miller was not principally outrage at the economic or even social upheaval of the Depression. What “radicalized” Arthur Miller was his growing insight that the Depression was a metaphor for what was wrong with America. “The Depression was only incidentally a matter of money,” Miller has stated, “rather it was a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the facade of American society.” “Adolescence (and Miller here is referring to the years before beginning college) is a kind of aching that only time can cure,” he continued, “but when at the same time the order of society has also melted and the old authority has shown its incompetence and hollowness, the way to maturity is radicalism.” 6

The fact that Miller’s radicalism would take a moral rather than political character is the product of several things. His views reflected and were reinforced by many other liberal intellectuals that were writing in this decade, as I will discuss in the following chapter. Also, his career as a playwright taught him that moral outrage is far more theatrically potent than political dictums. The most important reason however was the primary intellectual lesson Miller learned from his Depression experience. His mind caused him to “connect things” to search for the hidden truth that lay disguised by conventional beliefs and social behavior. The disillusion he felt at the collapse of his parent’s value system allowed him to see what was exposed behind those attitudes and beliefs. From the very beginning of his intellectual life, Miller was fascinated by

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This is what Miller means when he claims he is fascinated by sheer process itself. In other words, how does a person come to his end, or by what circumstances (inner and outer) does he choose to believe what he does and behave in the way that he does?

Miller pondered how the native personality of a man was changed by his world and how he in turn could change that world. He found that this was not an academic or literary question, but a practical problem of what to believe in order to proceed with life. Should one admire success, as his father did, or should one see the illusory nature of it and the destructive impact it had on so many people? “You can’t understand anything unless you understand its relations to its context,” Miller has said. “I did not believe after 1929 in the reality I saw with my eyes,” he continued, “there was an invisible world of cause and effect, a hidden order in the world.” For Arthur Miller his greatest desire was to uncover this hidden order and fulfill what he saw as the chief task of the great writer; that being, “the destroyer of chaos.” ⁷

When Miller entered the University of Michigan he already possessed the “raw material” to respond to the prevailing intellectual climate in Ann Arbor and the rest of the nation. Among his various activities was his employment at the *Michigan Daily*, the student newspaper at the University. Miller describes it as being the home of “every disputatious radical splinter group, along with the liberals and conservatives (who) shouted back at them.” ⁸ It was here that Miller was introduced to the national

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intellectual journals and the vigorous political climate that characterized the nation during the years 1935-1938. As a reporter for the *Daily*, Miller covered numerous political and labor events including the now famous automotive sit-down strike at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan in 1937.

By the time he arrived in Flint to interview the strike leader, Walter Reuther on New Year's Day in 1937, Miller's personal life had already predisposed him to a certain interpretation of events at the plant. In 1933-34 and during his summer breaks from the University, Miller worked as a laborer and delivery- man in a garment warehouse in New York City. Here, this son of a factory owner toiled nine hours a day in the lowest level of employment and saw first-hand the plight of many people who were exploited and abused in their struggle to survive. Miller would later chronicle this experience in his play, *A Memory of Two Mondays*. "By the time I went to Flint," Miller later said, "I identified with the workers in no abstract way; in fact, my work experience may account for my amazement at their solidarity." "It was nearly incredible to me that hundreds of ordinary factory workers, a large number of them recruited in the southern states where hostility to unions was endemic," Miller continued, "had one day simply stopped the machines, locked the factory doors from within, and refused to leave until their union was recognized as their bargaining agent." 9

This observation points out an often-overlooked aspect of Miller's work and career. Miller's politics sprang not just from intellectual discovery and commitment, but also

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from deeply felt personal experience connected to an evolving sense of himself and his discomfort with aspects of the world around him. Miller's amazement at the courage and solidarity of the strikers was thus not simply a political statement in the conventional sense, but also an expression of his own personal politics; the inseparable connection between his private and social worlds. The great genius of Tennessee Williams for example, was also this ability to transform deeply felt personal experiences into art in a way that certainly communicated a sense of his own personal politics. Their life experience might have made this political expression much different, but both men worked from a deeply emotional base and made political statements with their art. "After all," Miller said many years later, "isn't there something wrong with a world that has no place for Blanche DuBois?" 10

Working at the *Daily* and being exposed to the vigorous political debate in his classes and among his (mostly liberal and radical) friends, gave Miller a specific context to his strong emotional response to the events of the day. He noted later that 1936-37 was the first time that he observed non-political people thinking of common action as a way out of their impossible conditions. These same years were also when Miller completed his first two plays and much of the material for these works were drawn from his family history, his work in the garment warehouse and what he observed at the Flint strike. Perhaps more than any other single event, the Flint strike marked a turning point in Miller's life. He was twenty-two years old and still working on the second draft of his first play when he covered the strike for the *Michigan Daily*. Having been both the person who was proud of his father's owner-manager status and

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the low-level worker in the garment warehouse, Miller was deeply moved by what he observed in Flint.

Driven to Flint by a Ford worker, who told him the details of Henry Ford's pumping tear gas into one of his plant's sprinkler system to prevent a similar sit-down strike, Miller was met at the gates by National Guardsmen. These citizen-soldiers were manning machine guns pointed at the workers barricaded in the plant and had recently fired at three employees on the roof wounding one of them. He saw wives passing boxes of food to their husbands hoisted up on lines and was amazed to hear the laughing and bantering among the spouses. Before 1936, workers and strikes, unions and union-busters had been, for Miller, only discussed in the abstract by his father. Now, Miller understood for himself the realities of the labor movement, not just as a political concept but also as something he experienced on an intensely personal basis. Even more moving for the young man was his interview with Walter Reuther. Instead of being "a tough guy with no interest in what I was trying to do," the young, pale and reflective man with a baseball hat met Miller with the "direct quality of respectful attention." Miller was powerfully moved and the experience had a lasting impact on his political development. "Talking to Walter Reuther, I realized that he did not think of himself as controlling this incredible event," Miller said later, "but at best guiding and shaping an emotion that had boiled up from below." ¹¹

No better metaphor could exist to describe the relationship between Arthur Miller's politics and his emotional life. Miller's political ideas and indeed the very themes of

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From the very beginning, Miller's work has been political in that his plots and characters are indisputably rooted in American social reality but they are not tools of political doctrine because they emanate from a metaphysical rather than intellectual source. Studying Miller's politics is the best way of discovering what is uniquely “boiling up from below” while at the same time comparing his ideas and concerns with other artists and intellectuals of his era also reinforces the sense that Miller's perspective was not unique among writers during this period. It is a profound mistake to conclude that Miller's political life is antithetical or detached from his artistic life. Instead they are expressions of each other.

In attempting to place Miller in a specific social and historical context, I have adopted the method articulated by historian Robert Crunden of grouping Miller with other men (writers) who are representative of a general position. ¹² This general position or political viewpoint I term, “Popular Front radicalism” which characterizes a broad intellectual climate that developed among artists and writers on the political left during the period 1935-1939. A unique combination of social, economic and political forces joined to produce a situation in which a great number of writers shared broadly common views about the nation's problems and expressed these ideas in books, magazines and plays. These intellectuals were loosely organized by the formation of the Popular Front in 1935 and worked to create artistic and literary support for this organization of progressive left and liberal forces. Their efforts produced (or perhaps reflected) a distinct intellectual point of view that I see as a radicalism of a very

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specific kind endemic to this period in American history, on which I elaborate in the following chapter. It is this distinctive political point of view that existed and ended in the 1930's (except for a brief revival in the immediate postwar period) that made an indelible impression on Arthur Miller. It is my contention that Miller has remained a Popular Front radical to this day because the moral and philosophical basis for this "movement" is a perfect expression of Miller's own view of the world.

Indeed, Miller in a certain sense has never stopped writing plays of the 1930's. In fact the subjects of his plays, to the present, betray an intellectual and political predisposition that formed in this decade. I call this predisposition Popular Front radicalism because it characterizes both a set of values internalized by Miller and a period of time in American historical experience when the playwright and many other like-minded intellectuals shared these values. What is striking to me about Miller is that the essential dynamic (the main conflict) in virtually all of his plays is an expression of this predisposition, this radicalism that remains at the core of his work. To understand Miller and his plays requires an appreciation of his political orientation. As I demonstrate later in probing his early plays, Miller's can be seen as radical, not in the conventional way this term is often understood, but in a manner consistent with the very special circumstances of the Popular Front period.

Throughout Miller's autobiography, *Timebends*, he proclaims himself a radical and also questions why that must be his fate. Yet by any normal measure, Arthur Miller is not a radical. At no point in his career has he advocated fundamental change in the

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economic or social structure of the United States nor worked to replace its political system with another type. In fact, with the notable exception of one individual in his first play, his characters have never challenged the basic foundations of American democratic capitalism. They certainly complain about it and suffer from it, but there are no voices to do away with it. So, on what basis can Arthur Miller be termed a “radical playwright?”

The answer lies in my definition of the term Popular Front radical. The term Popular Front, in its literal sense, emerged from the 1935 decision by the Soviet Comintern to form a Democratic Front of workers, farmers and middle-class elements against fascism and war. Troubled by the rise of European fascism and the threat posed by the rising military might of Germany and Italy, the Soviet Union sought the friendship of capitalist democratic nations and hence broadened alliances of national communist parties with non-revolutionary classes. All communist parties, including the American party, were instructed to reorganize their line of action accordingly. This meant that the Party in the United States could form alliances with broadly diverse groups on the political left and even the center to oppose fascism. The alliance enabled liberals, reformers, socialists, intellectuals, artists and communists to join in a broad coalition with organized labor, small farmers and various ethnic groups to work for a common goal. This coincided with a leftward drift in the New Deal programs of the Democratic Party and produced a situation where virtually everyone on the left could think of themselves as radicals or revolutionaries even as

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It was at the Congress of American Writers in 1935 that this new policy was introduced on the American intellectual left. Various speakers repeated the same theme that in essence broadened the definition of the radical movement in an effort to find new allies in the American community. **14** Kenneth Burke gave a remarkably controversial speech that signaled the abrupt transition from art and literature, which featured the struggle of the proletarian class (the workers) against capitalism to an art more in touch with American values. He suggested replacing the term “worker” with “the people” which would have the effect of putting artists and intellectuals as much in the center of the revolutionary activity as anyone else. Thus writers, such as Miller were themselves the subject of a revolutionary struggle and were given a radical status by virtue of participation in the Popular Front alongside people of common experience and political views. **15**

The now “radical” intellectual was not necessarily a radical in any revolutionary sense however. “I want to emphasize again,” said Kenneth Burke in his famous address, “that the propagandist’s (intellectuals) main job is to disarm” (as opposed to organize). **16** The American Communist leader, Earl Browder supported this non-radical, radicalism of the Popular Front. “This is not a program of revolutionary overthrow of capitalism,” he said, “the People’s Front is not socialism and it has the merit of making no pretensions to that effect.” “The realization of this program

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(however) creates the most favorable conditions for gathering and organizing the forces of socialism,” he added “and no one can seriously pretend to fight for socialism without fighting stubbornly by all means to create those most favorable conditions.” **17**

So, here we have the voice of American Communism giving his blessing to a movement unifying the literary and artistic left, giving them a certain status and yet not requiring any ideological adherence to radical or revolutionary doctrine. This is what Burke meant by the radical work of intellectuals being to disarm the forces preventing progressive change. Writers and artists were now defined as radicals if they pointed their finger at the forces of reaction. This loose requirement allowed a large number of writers on the left to imagine themselves radicals, including among them playwrights like Clifford Odets, whom Miller read and watched closely, and including also the young Arthur Miller. It also served to blur the distinction between reformer and radical; socialist and communist; liberal and Marxist. Historian R. Alan Lawson concludes that in this period, there was no necessary distinction between radical and liberal and indeed he simply defines those on the left as intellectuals seeking solutions without resorting to inflexible dogma. **18**

The importance of the development of the Popular Front to American intellectual history cannot be overstated. What was created, in effect, was a psychology and a socio-political viewpoint unique to the Popular Front period. For Michael Denning this viewpoint was the social character or the general cultural pattern that he terms a

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structure of feeling. "To see the Popular Front as a structure of feeling," he claims, "is thus to see it as a cultural charter for a generation."¹⁹ It is important here to restate that the Popular Front was not an organization to which one belonged or that published a magazine or issued rules or guidelines. Rather, it was a cultural term that identified a stance, a consistency of social, political and economic ideas held by liberals during a four to five year period. Arthur Miller's plays and writings during these years were consistent with those by other intellectuals of the period and reflected this "structure of feeling." In a time of tremendous uncertainty, intellectuals were assigned a radical identity without a radical political ideology. In an attempt to unite against fascism, the Popular Front allowed people who had no real radical agenda to contribute to radical action by expressing support for labor and liberal reform. The Popular Front translated into cultural affairs, sought to unite writers according to their political commitments to *reform* and this alliance between members of the middle class made a good deal of sense in a country that did not cleanly divide between bourgeoisie and proletarian; between reactionary capitalism and socialism and in which political power rested on aggregating many interests in broad national electoral coalitions. **20**

Indeed, the Popular Front marked the merger of the radical literary movement with political liberalism. Historian Frank Warren articulates the thoughts of many scholars when he concludes that it was not any ideology that led liberals into this union with the Communists, but rather it was the lack of ideology. The Popular Front, for Warren was not a well-developed philosophy of history and social change, but a series of

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phrases, slogans and catchwords that blurred theoretical differences and well-articulated philosophies. It was necessary for all those who believed in democracy and progress despite their differences to unite against reaction and fascism. “Progress”, “forward-looking” and “democracy and unity” were the catchwords while “retrogression”, “reaction” and fascism were the enemies. The energy was the ideology and the identification of the enemy was the work of the radical. The only requirement for radical status and revolutionary fervor in America therefore was a commitment to oppose fascism and to support the general foreign policy of peaceful collective security. **21** This is what defines a Popular Front radical.

Since anti-fascism was such an important part of the formation of the Popular Front and since fascism is an important theme in many of Miller’s plays, it is important to determine what is exactly meant by the term. Although everyone agreed that Nazi Germany was the embodiment of fascist principles, most intellectuals fluctuated between two very different views of what constituted the nature of fascism itself. The traditional Communist explanation saw Fascism as an extension of capitalism or in the words of British Communist, John Strachey, “merely the militant arm of the largest property owners.” The publication, *New Masses* saw fascism as, “open terrorist rule of the most reactionary elements of monopoly capitalism.” **22** Seen in this light, the elimination of capitalism as a system would also eradicate fascism that was simply capitalism in its most extreme form.

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After the creation of the Popular Front however, liberal intellectuals subtly altered the definition of fascism. Rather than the tool of big industrialists, fascism was seen as a middle-class movement that was supported by many big industrialists. When middle-class people reacted with desperation over capitalism's failures and the insecurity of the system, argued Alfred Bingham they demanded a dictatorship to preserve order. The middle-class mind, he argues hated monopolistic power, wealthy bankers and industrialists, but did not necessarily associate them with fascism and were certainly not interested in surrendering the capitalist system.²³ Fascism was seen by many liberal intellectuals more as a state of mind, a misdirected revolt against capitalism rather than part of capitalism itself. For Stuart Chase, fascism was an alternative for an abdicated capitalism that would throw out the "Reds with bankers and brokers into the dust-bin." The editors of the *New Republic* and *The Nation*, reflecting and sharing the views of most liberal intellectuals saw Fascism as the product of middle-class anxieties that could be manipulated by large industrial and monied interests. If fascism came to America they argued, it would not arise from the wealthy resisting change, but from the broad demand by the masses for change. Its leaders would be anti-banker and anti-big business, and at first the wealthy industrialists would see it as threatening. Soon however, capitalists sensing that fear of instability rather revolutionary ideology was at the core of the movement would come to see it as a useful ally against the subversive nature of organized labor and true social revolution. ²⁴

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This view of fascism as a mentality emanating from middle-class anxieties is crucial to understanding the work of Arthur Miller. For Miller, fascism, the brutal combination of authoritarian control and political violence, has the latent potential in a competitive system to offer no more satisfying values than the accumulation of money and the pursuit of success. This more broad definition of fascism explains why it has remained an important preoccupation for Miller, long after the fascist governments in Germany, Italy and Japan ended. Miller became an opponent of fascism in the 1930's because, like numerous others he saw the insidious power of fascism at work in Germany and Japan. Clearly as a Jew, he needed little convincing to see the personal danger of the potent anti-Semitism of the Nazi's. But he also saw the fascist spirit (mentality) in American life and he created characters who personified this tendency.

The Popular Front and its unique brand of radicalism was the prevailing intellectual energy (on the political Left) to which Miller was introduced, as he grew more politically active in Michigan. It provided the young Miller with the perfect expression of his political sensibilities. As his early plays will show, he opposed capitalism, scorned obsession with pecuniary culture, searched for an alternative social philosophy and offered big speeches about the merits of community, the working class and collectivist values. Yet, as was characteristic of the Popular Front radical he knew what he was against, but he had only symbols, images, slogans and sentiments to offer in its place. The lack of a specific political agenda reinforces the idea that the "agenda" of Popular Front radicalism was moral rather than political.

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This moral radicalism is the driving force behind Miller's great plays. It is, in its own way, as subversive to the American social and political reality as any revolutionary politics because it posits that basic American values are fundamentally misguided. Consistent with other radicals of his generation, Miller exposes these false values without suggesting specific alternatives. Seeing Miller in this light provides us with an understanding of why he continues to ask the same questions in play after play. It helps explain why a person such as Miller (and countless others like him) could say very radical sounding things (as we will see in examining his early plays) and consider himself a revolutionary artist without ever having to formulate political positions consistent with those statements and it also helps us understand how someone like Miller could be a popular success with plays that are essentially critiques of American capitalism.

The study of the "politics" of Arthur Miller is significant therefore not only because it informs the reading of his plays, but also because it closely parallels the path taken by so many other intellectuals of his generation. In this way, it is an excellent means of examining American intellectual history from 1930-1950. What distinguishes Miller from many of his contemporaries on the political left however, is the extent to which he has retained important aspects of the Popular Front period and incorporated them into his art. The story of Arthur Miller is therefore one both of evolution and continuity. As a theatre artist Miller evolved in his craft, gradually developing the ability to manifest his political ideas only through the action of the play and as a result of the distinct and genuine personalities and relationships in the world inhabited

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by his characters. But politically and intellectually, Miller retains the same basic viewpoint that he developed during the Popular Front period. This continuity is evidenced by the remarkable similarity in theme and structure between his first play, *No Villain* and many of his later works. **25**

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1. Christopher Bigsby of East Anglia University is the most insightful and articulate writer focusing on Arthur Miller. See especially his book, *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and *A Critical Guide to Twentieth Century American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
2. Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p.42.
3. Robert A. Martin, Ed, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p.176.
4. *Timebends*, p. 18.
5. *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, p. 177.
6. *Timebends*, p. 115.
7. *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, p. 179-180.
8. *Timebends*, p. 95.

9. Ibid., p.

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9. Ibid., p. 265.

10. Conversation with Arthur Miller in East Lansing, Michigan 1987.

11. See Miller's description of his visit to Flint in *Timebends*, pp. 265-68.

12. Robert Crunden, *From Self to Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972).

13. Edna Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre* (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 151. There are a number of excellent summaries of the creation of the Popular Front. James Barrett gives an interesting view in his book, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). R. Alan Lawson, in his book, *The Failure of Independent Liberalism* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1971), makes an intriguing argument about the creation and impact of Popular Front. He claims that the PF saved the Communist Party from entirely losing its grip on the intellectual community. Rather than the CP, "luring the poor liberal fish into its net" the reverse was actually the case. It was the Communists, according to Lawson who had to change their ideological clothing to comport with PF liberals. In the end liberals benefited significantly from the increased national fervor for American traditions and the opposition to Fascism that the PF promoted. The most complete examinations of

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21. Warren. F

- the Popular Front are found in Michael Denning's work, *The Cultural Front*, footnoted below and Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, (Middletown Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).
14. James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), p. 139.
15. Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 15.
16. Loren Baritz, Ed, *The American Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 202.
17. Frank Warren, *Liberals and Communism* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1966), pp. 103-104.
18. *The Failure of Independent Liberalism*, p 14.
19. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 2000), p. 26.
20. Gilbert, p. 134.
21. Warren, p. 107.

22. Ibid., p.

23. Alfred B.

24. Warren p

25. *No Villain*

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22. Ibid., p. 92.

23. Alfred Bingham, *Insurgent America*, from Warren p. 92.

24. Warren pp. 97-99.

25. *No Villain* is one of the unpublished plays that I examined in the Arthur Miller collection at the Ransom Center, University of Texas library used in this study. The second version of this play, *They Too Arise* and a final version entitled, *The Grass Still Grows* also are contained in this collection. In addition the unpublished plays, *Honors at Dawn*, *The Great Disobedience*, *The Golden Years*, *The Half-Bridge* and the unpublished, early version of *The Man Who Had All The Luck*, are contained here. The collection also features letters from Miller to various individuals, diaries of his wartime work on *G.I. Joe*, many other essays, copies of his radio plays including, *The Pussycat and the Expert Plumber Who Was a Man* and copies of his published works. The University of Michigan also possesses a collection of Miller's plays written while at the University, including a slightly different version of *They Too Arise*. It is my determination that, given the inaccessibility of these scripts to the reading public, it is important to provide a lengthy and detailed plot summary as part of my analysis.

CHAPTER TWO

POPULAR FRONT RADICAL

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What can be said then about the ideology of Popular Front radicalism? What were the basic ideas of many intellectuals on the political left that Miller shared (as evidenced in both his plays and writings) which we can identify as the core intellectual energy of the Popular Front? The most important concept among Popular Front intellectuals was the idea that the meaning of the Depression was the need for a *different set of moral and cultural values* by which Americans ought to live. This moral and cultural emphasis resulted primarily from the fact that the left, (including the Communist Party) gave overwhelming support for the political leadership of FDR and the reforms instituted by the New Deal.¹ From the perspective of the Popular Front, America's problems were partly those of an incomplete welfare state that was plagued with social and economic inequality. But the country's greatest woes were moral, psychological and cultural and the true "enemy" was the immorality of dangerous and distorted values associated with competition and materialism. Capitalism provided the country with no meaning or purpose beyond that of making money. The obvious conclusion is that private enterprise separates people from each other and reduces relationships to functions of the market place. Thus America was made sick by its economic system and some radical action was needed, but because there was no clear vision of what a new political reality would look like beyond the step by step reforms of the New Deal, many intellectuals saw radical action as a moral rejection of the economic system, which might (by implication) suggest some sort of different social order. ²

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A moral assault on a failed capitalism in Depression America was for historian Warren Susman the search for a true American culture. The quest for a culture was in itself part of the search for meaning and values in the wake of an event (the Depression) that had rendered previous values devoid of meaning. For Susman this moral energy was a symptom of a search for a truly American way of life. It is interesting to note that the term “American way of life” had never been used in a specific sense until the Popular Front period. The discovery of the idea of American culture and its wide spread application as a tool against meaningless industrial civilization, argued Susman, was at once culturally radical and politically conservative. **3**

Yet it would be a disservice to the legacy of the Popular Front to minimize the importance of a radical change in the definition of American culture. Certainly it is a political act to engage in a complex effort to seek to define America as a culture. Miller himself said that before 1929 he thought culture was synonymous with rich people. Susman supports Miller’s change of feeling with his assertion that in the Popular Front years, intellectuals worked to morally differentiate between American culture and American civilization. American civilization was concerned primarily with the material advancement in the nation whereas American culture focused on the quality of life and the search for the right way of living in the world. Regardless of the political success or failure of the New Deal, Michael Denning argues, this cultural shift (which resulted from the radical energy of Popular Front intellectuals) was undeniably a substantial political accomplishment. For Denning, the “people” became

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the trope of the left culture in this period because the Popular Front (which he terms the cultural front) imagined itself as a people's culture. American culture was transformed, according to Denning, by Popular Front intellectuals who created a "proletarianization of American culture, the increased influence on and participation of working-class Americans in the world of culture and the arts. Miller's first three plays written while at the University of Michigan serve to substantiate what Denning calls the "plebian sensibility" that became "hegemonic during the years of the Depression."⁴

This moral rejection of elements of the American system was also expressed by the fascination that Miller and many writers and intellectuals expressed for the Soviet Union. In all three versions of Miller's first play, his major characters discuss Russia as an alternative model for the economic disaster they face. The young playwright needed only to have seen Clifford Odet's 1935 play, *Awake and Sing* in which the young Ralph discusses with his grandfather the attributes of the Soviet system where "life is not printed on dollar bills" to imagine a similar discussion in his own family. Other playwrights such as John Howard Lawson, Lillian Hellman, George Sklar, John Dos Passos and original writers in the "workers theatres" in Michigan, New York and elsewhere also championed the Russian experiment. Their voices joined with others in virtually every corner of the intellectual world bridging such diverse thinkers as John Dewey, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley and Sidney Hook in finding in the Soviet socialist model an effective weapon against the moral and economic disaster that plagued America in the mid-1930's. ⁵

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Yet just as the Popular Front incorporated the many voices of the intellectual left into a single anti-fascist alliance, it made almost impossible a specific political agenda consistent with support for the Soviet system. Few intellectuals had ever been to Russia and fewer attempted to demonstrate practical means by which Soviet policies could work in America. Indeed, an attempt to do so would violate the spirit of the Popular Front by creating competition with the New Deal and threatening the alliance against fascism. Thus Russia was more of a concept, a metaphor, and a way of expressing anger toward a failed America than it ever was a model of real change. To support Russia in some loud but non-specific way was really a moral statement about the current American reality, a radical act (in the Popular Front way) in support of a new social philosophy.

In his book, *Liberals and Communism*, Frank Warren articulated the precise nature of this part of Popular Front ideology. Any complete understanding of the relations of liberalism and Communism during the thirties, he asserted must recognize that it was not Orthodox Marxist doctrine that appealed to liberals (i.e. class struggle leading to violent revolution, dictatorship of the proletariat) rather it was the existence of Russia. When the Communist program was most revolutionary, during the early 1930's, Warren argued it was the least influential among liberals, but when it was least revolutionary (during the Popular Front period) it was the most influential. ⁶ Warren could not have known that he spoke Miller's very words when the playwright wrote in 1987 that (for him in the 1930's) "the Soviets were developing the system of the

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future without exploitation and irrational waste.” For Miller in the 1930’s Russia “was not an earthly empire but rather a kind of spiritual condition.” 7

Aside from the fascination with Russia, however, Popular Front ideology generated no ways to define what new social philosophy would take the place of the old. The themes of Miller’s pre-1946 plays might serve as a boiler plate for Popular Front radicalism in that the plots suggest that political action in America would only be possible when people awakened to precisely what psychological, economic and metaphysical forces accounted for their misery. His plays were the stories of people who gradually gained the necessary insight to change and that process of gaining insight (and not the specific kind of change) was the thrust of the play. This was largely true of countless other Popular Front “radicals” who seemed to believe that somehow socialism would triumph and America prosper once the middle class unencumbered itself of bourgeoisie attitudes and values. The emphasis was on the realization and not the revolution and that is why Russia was so significant as a metaphor because it expressed an intellectual sentiment while requiring no specific ideological commitment to fundamental revolution.

The point of this discussion of Popular Front radicalism is not just to identify the prevailing intellectual currents that influenced Arthur Miller. Rather, it is also to examine the political climate during Miller’s college years during which the fundamental moral assumptions that characterized the American system were being challenged. This is important because Miller largely adopted this political perspective

and propensity to morally critique the American system. This perspective, this particular manner of challenging the American scheme remains with the playwright to the present day. This propensity to expose false values rather than to assert different ones is both typical of Miller and the Popular Front. It would lead many future critics to object to Miller's plays because they seemed to fail to complete themselves in that the playwright didn't follow through to the obvious conclusion of the moral indictment. Critic Christopher Bigsby points out that this means that Miller's conviction remained at the level of rhetoric in that it never transformed itself into social action or dramatic effect. ⁸ This judgment however, betrays a common misunderstanding of the nature of Popular Front radicalism. What Bigsby fails to realize is that the energy of the Popular Front radical was more rhetoric than social thought or political action because its emphasis was on a sense of commitment and moral certainty at a time of great despair and economic chaos.

Miller's early plays are filled with the rhetoric and emotion shared by many young intellectuals during the 1930's that their generation was part of the dawning of a new age. America was "thirsty for something to believe in" said writer Stuart Chase and in particular this meant that it was the obligation of the intellectual (and especially those of the young generation) to remake the world by discrediting the ways of the past.⁹ This mission of course is certainly not unique to intellectuals of the Popular Front period, but the Depression had provided a mandate for change and intellectuals and artists (like Miller) were filled with optimism. The "ways of the past," defined as those attitudes and values that had contributed to the breakdown in the American

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economic and social framework were the common foe of radical artists and writers. Thus, since outdated and misguided values were the real enemy of this new age, the responses were primarily cultural, psychological and moral rather than economic or political.

For most on the political left, the economic collapse revealed the extent to which a deeper more spiritual breakdown had taken place in the “old order.” The Depression had exposed the vacuity and distortion of American ideals in that pecuniary culture was eroding the social fabric, degrading the quality of life and providing Americans with nothing to live for except making money. It was the immorality of private enterprise, its inability to provide the fair distribution of wealth and its exclusion of any values other than profit that caused many intellectuals to call for what Waldo Frank called, “a revolution of the inward man.” **10**

That the focus of revolutionary energy should be on the “inner man” rather than specific political actions was characteristic of the “radicalism” of the Popular Front intellectuals. The emphasis was on the plight of the American individual who was being immorally ground to pieces by the economic system as well as of programs that would alter the system and then impact the individual. The radical act was the exposure of the inhumanity of acquisitive capitalism instead of the positing of revolutionary actions to counter exploitation. Herbert Agar in his book, *Who Owns America* states this very thing when he calls for building a better world that would provide some picture in human terms of what this new world would be like.

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Reformation was necessary he claimed but social and economic theories were not enough unless they were based on an ideal that could stir the human heart. **11**

Richard Pells argued the same point when he discussed intellectuals of the period as cultural rather than political rebels. They were understandably vague about what the future might actually look like, either for the society or the individual, he reasoned. Therefore it was often easier for them to describe those aspects of American civilization they despised than to set forth structural alternatives. Hopefully a moral rejection of bourgeois traditions might by implication suggest the values writers had in mind when they talked about a different social order. If capitalism not only produced poverty and unemployment but also prevented men from leading a sane existence, Pells claimed, if it promoted chaos among institutions as well as between men, if it made both an economy of abundance and a harmonious society impossible, then many writers felt more justified in offering a symbolic reproach to American materialism and greed than in outlining programmatic solutions to the Depression that went beyond the New Deal agenda. **12**

Nowhere was this symbolic reproach to American values more evident than the portrayal of the American family as the victim of an immoral economic system. The depictions of the suffering American family became not only the subject of many novels and plays of the 1930's but also served as a symbolic reproach to the system itself. It was not an easy task to convince people that the American dream was

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responsible for the malaise of the era and that a wholesale rejection of middle class values and traditions was necessary. Thus the major dramatic action in the 1930's plays of Miller, Clifford Odets and many others was a clash of old versus new values and a story line that illustrated how private enterprise had reduced human relationships to reflections of the market place. Old values were often personified in characters who opposed reform and were typical of the "economic royalty." No more urgent or radical action existed than to separate Americans from these destructive values. If people could be shown how they had internalized the divisions, contradictions and immorality inherent in competitive capitalism then by implication a new set of values would evolve. If artists and intellectuals could take a people who had never known any other system and suffered from the inability to even imagine anything different and help them imagine a brighter future, then they would have succeeded in planting the seeds of change. For many Popular Front intellectuals this activity became the very definition of radicalism. The extraordinary number of plays that attempted to provide this insight caused the scholar Mark Van Dorn to note that, "the very best plays seem to be written when everybody is trying to write the same one." 13

Also characteristic of Popular Front radicalism was a redefinition of the concept of freedom. Miller need turn only to his own father to see a definition of freedom that had resulted in despair and confusion. For many on the political left, the Depression had made a mockery of the prevailing American "mythology" of freedom defined as the absolute right and privilege of the individual to pursue personal fulfillment and

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economic success. Abstracted in this way freedom resulted in producing a society of separate individuals with no connection to others and fostered an economic system that allowed one group or class to prosper at the expense of another. The economic situation required intellectuals writing in publications such as *New Republic*, *The Nation*, *New Masses*, *Modern Quarterly* and *The Partisan Review* to disassociate themselves from the bourgeoisie concept of personal privilege to a more collectivist view of freedom. In the words of John Dewey, the concept of personal rights could not be separated from the kind of society in which the individual lived. **14**

This emphasis on the social aspects of people's lives and the notion that attitudes and values (such as the definition of freedom) were shaped primarily by social norms and institutions had an enormous impact on the career of Arthur Miller. He would later say that it was impossible for him to write a play of individual psychology without an equal emphasis on the social context because man is in society as much as society is in man. This reflected, at least partially, the prevailing intellectual currents that he encountered as he began his career. The radical dimension of this lies in the rejection of the traditional American conception of the individual's desire to free himself from society as an attribute and asserting instead that this mythology only prevented individuals from realizing the interrelationship between themselves and their social and cultural milieu.

Thus the identification of man as a social animal and the explanation of his values and behavior lying only within a specific social context led naturally to the analysis of

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that society itself. This desire to put the “failed” American system under the microscope was not only the subject of uncountable numbers of literary and theatrical endeavors, but also helps explain the widespread appeal of socialism and Marxist thought in the period. Marxism was widely avowed by Popular Front intellectuals (including Miller) because it asserted the social definition of man and required persons to identify themselves as part of the larger whole and urged them to change institutions based on this new definition..

Yet, it was also true of these intellectuals that while Marxism was a potent weapon in evaluating American social and economic life, it was rarely ever seen as a specific plan for economic and political change. Proclaiming oneself a Marxist was radical in the sense that it implied support for collectivist ideas and rejected bourgeoisie life. This is precisely why Arthur Miller could consider himself a Marxist and a radical. He embraced the moral certainty of Marxism because the rejection of acquisitive individualism would in some way prepare the way for socialism and Marxism gave to him and many other intellectuals a badge of courage that fed the need for personal action and commitment on the part of every person. The Popular Front radical was an individual who could use the rhetoric of Marxism as a working vocabulary to castigate the existing system without using that rhetoric to advocate revolutionary political change that the vocabulary seemed to demand. ¹⁵ In the next chapter we will see that this is exactly what Miller does in many of his early plays in that his central character proclaims himself a Marxist solely because he opposes the current economic conditions.¹⁶

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At the very time when Miller was working on his first play and proclaiming his Marxist convictions to his father an article appeared in the periodical, *Partisan Review and Anvil*. Writer Alan Calmer called for Marxists to agree to a broad set of critical principles to eliminate all traces of “leftism” (i.e. any mention of proletarian revolution) which had made earlier radical literature uncreative. If the radical movement was to make any progress, Calmer proclaimed propaganda as a critical concept should be dropped and critics should forget about the slogan “art as a weapon.” Moreover, intellectuals should realize that “proletarian” and “bourgeois” and other vestiges of (Marxist) “leftism” were not meaningful literary terms. **17**

The Popular Front instead created an Americanized Marxism, or perhaps more accurately a unique pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, suitable to America, that was acceptable to the Communist Party because it did not conflict with its political aims.**18** An artist, like the young Miller, could define himself as a radical and even a Marxist because he was participating in the moral rejection of the old order and demanding that society fulfill its human responsibility more effectively. “Whenever our current culture is found to cramp or to distort the quest of considerable number of persons for satisfaction of their basic needs,” said social scientist, Robert Lynd, “there lay a fertile field for analysis for analysis and action.” **19** This analysis and action are at the heart of what I am arguing is Popular Front radicalism. The finger of radical energy is pointed at the moral catastrophe left by the Depression and not the political actions necessary to create a new society. This does not mean Popular Front intellectuals

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were not radical, rather it redefines their radicalism as a moral rather than political activity. Arthur Miller became a radical of this sort.

The uniquely American way in which the Popular Front employed Marxism for non-political objectives can be seen in the idea that the ultimate goal of its philosophy was more the creation of a new man, the spiritual transformation of the individual than a new political state. A widely held belief in the period was that America suffered from a spiritual breakdown caused when the Depression exposed the inhumanity of competitive capitalism. Marxism was seen, beyond its obvious contributions to political philosophy as central to satisfying man's spiritual needs. **20** The radical component in the social transformation foreseen by many Popular Front intellectuals was the creation of a new man; spiritually regenerated individuals who would then go on to transform society in some undefined way. Marxism was thus a spiritual force, a religion of sorts, because it allowed the individual, through his own free will to transform his own life and eventually take social action. **21**

Nowhere was this spiritual transformation more evident than in the theatre, especially in the years after 1935. For the most part plays written between the crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Popular Front in 1935 were similar in theme to the failed proletarian literature. John Howard Lawson's play, *Stevedore*, Sidney Kingsley's, *Men in White* and Paul Green's, *The House of Connelly* were the most well known examples of plays that genuinely attempted to communicate revolutionary themes. *Stevedore* was perhaps the most successful because it was the most melodramatic of

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the three and stirred passions in the audience. The story deals with injustices done to black workers in Louisiana and ends when unionized white workers who put labor solidarity above racial prejudice and rescue their comrades from the crowd break up a racist mob. But this is only the most successful example of hundreds of lesser “radical” works of playwrights such as George Sklar, Michael Gold, Sophie Treadwell, John Dos Passos, Victor Wolfson and Friedrich Wolf.²²

The most perfect expression of Popular Front radicalism in the theatre was embodied in the organization called the Group Theatre and in particular the playwright, Clifford Odets. Nowhere could there be found an intellectual or artist closer to Arthur Miller in the 1930’s than his fellow dramatist Odets. No clearer example of the inclination of the Popular Front radical to seek spiritual transformation in their writings exists than that of the primary voice of the Group Theatre. In many ways Odets serves as the living embodiment of what it meant to be a Popular Front radical. What of course distinguished Miller from his older counterpart is that the 1930’s largely extinguished Odet’s intellectual and artistic energy and it was left to Miller to carry on with the essential challenge that Popular Front radicalism made to American life.

The Group Theatre was formed in 1931 with the stated intention of being an organization of actors and directors formed with the ultimate aim to create a permanent acting company to maintain New York seasons. Their performance methodology was that of the Russian theatre artist Constantin Stanislavski, who developed a method of creating truthful acting on stage that was consistent with the

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company's desire to seek the truth in contemporary social reality. "We believe in the perfectibility of man, or at least the inevitability of the struggle against evil," said founder Harold Clurman. This goal brought raves from Waldo Frank, who insisted that the primary task of the writer was to focus on cultural problems and on a fundamental spiritual transformation of Americans. Praising the Group Theatre, Frank now declared that the Group was searching for a new society, a new humanity, in the moral and spiritual as well as the economic sense. **23**

After unsuccessful attempts to produce "revolutionary plays" (*House of Connelly*, *Men in White*) the Group found its artistic vocabulary in the plays of Clifford Odets. Because the Group considered themselves a radical organization but had no coherent political position they were uncomfortable with being co-opted as a theatre that either served the Communist Party or resembled the various workers theatres that were proliferating during the early 1930's. The Group lacked interest in building a new audience (as were many Marxist oriented theatres) but rather sought to convert the existing audience of primarily middle class patrons. The Group had a clear social vision (being a theatre that responded to human needs) but when asked what ideology the theatre articulated, Clurman was forced to admit that it was something vague even mystical. **24**

This powerful social vision, firm commitment to artistic excellence and vague, almost mystical, ideology characterized the popular plays of Clifford Odets. Despite his joining the Communist Party in 1934 and his complete condemnation of American

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capitalism and its accompanying value system, this self-proclaimed radical conformed largely to the same basic assumptions as most other intellectuals of the Popular Front. His plays such as *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost*, are full of revolutionary sounding rhetoric but he is always more interested in a moral and spiritual transformation in his characters (and his audience) than any concrete political actions. Yet this lack of specificity and focus instead on the spiritual awakening was both the source of his usefulness for the Group and the reason for the popularity of plays.

Four of Odet's most famous plays were first produced in the year 1935. The twenty-one year old Miller saw all of these plays and later commented that an Odet's play was awaited like news off the press, as though through it we would know what to think of our prospects and ourselves. For four or five years, said Miller in *Timebends*, there was no other writer who so concentrated in himself the symbolic uniqueness of his era. ²⁵ Odet's uniqueness was the ability to generate tremendously explosive scenes and characters that ripped to shreds the hypocrisy of the American economic and social systems, while at the same time being equally ineffective in proposing anything in its place. His first play, and the most overtly revolutionary in tone, was *Waiting for Lefty*, which concerned labor unrest in the taxi industry in New York. The famous ending of the play occurs with the reading of *The Communist Manifesto* and the cast and audience rising to their feet shouting, Strike!! Strike!!

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Yet, the strike is only for better wages and working conditions and the play's real strength is the character of Joe who makes every attempt to avoid taking any action. It is his spiritual transformation (from fearful and impotent to brave and committed) that is the subject of the entire plot. It seems that Odets is not concerned that we don't know what Joe will do (beyond striking) or what he stands for (except not being abused anymore) the dramatic power lay in Joe's regeneration and the striking authenticity of his thoughts and words. For Harold Clurman, Joe's transformation was a call for greater dignity, a bolder humanity and for the realization of the full nature of man. ²⁶ For Odets the fact that Joe could now understand that the system was the problem (and not himself) made this transformation a radical act itself. This drama of "awareness" was widely copied and indeed inspired Miller to write "radical" plays in much the same vein.

The three other Odets plays of that year all featured a spiritual transformation at the core of their dramatic action. *Till The Day I Die* is set in Nazi Germany and concerns a cell of Communists who fight the new German state. Similar to *Waiting for Lefty*, it invokes Marxist rhetoric to urge on the creation of a "United Front." But the play's real substance concerns the spiritual conversion of Major Dehring a Nazi officer who commits suicide after endorsing the efforts of the Party members. *Paradise Lost* and *Awake and Sing!* are plays with virtually identical themes that culminate in the major character articulating his spiritual rebirth and his refusal to continue believing in the fantasies of American idealism. In *Paradise Lost*, Leo Gordon is the idealistic business partner of Sam Katz who is surreptitiously defrauding him. Through the

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course of the play, the characters undergo a stripping away of their indifference and sentimental attachment to material values. Alone at the end of this (disorganized and seldom produced) play, Leo's family is thrown out of its house and he stands alone next to his furniture on the street. In his "transformation speech" he says that "the past was a dream, but this is real; to know that something must be done." In keeping with the spirit of Popular Front radicalism however, neither Leo nor his creator put forward any real idea what that "something" is.

Awake and Sing! the best play of the four focuses on the personal growth and "awakening" of Ralph Berger. Ralph is trapped in a family that worships the American pieties of wealth and social status and for most of the play, he seems unable to break free from its clutches. The play demonstrates the brilliance of Odets as a creator of tough, urban, ethnic characters (set in the Bronx) and the story itself is believable and engaging. The troubling contradictions in American life create a moral dilemma for the characters that is played out in a human way with relatively little didactic or pseudo-political dialogue. Through the course of events, Ralph gains the proper insight about a society where "life is printed on dollar bills" and he ends the play with a celebratory speech that signals his private rebirth in his own mind. "I see that I've been dead," he says " and now I'm born, I swear to God, I'm one week old." "I want the whole city to hear it, Ralph declares, " fresh blood, arms, we got em and we're glad we're living."

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Certainly this is a drama of rebellion, but the “awakening” is a moral and spiritual one completely in keeping with other voices of the Popular Front. The process by which Ralph will move from insight to action is left unanswered. He does not say what specifically he is going to do with his “fresh arms” or exactly how the world is going to be different. Odets was quoted as saying that the play, followed to its logical conclusions, was revolutionary in that it says that people should have richer and fuller lives. **27** The play is rebellious in that it points the finger of blame at the enemy. It is not however radical except in the specific context of the ideology of the Popular Front where the power of a moral rejection of the present American reality constitutes the activity. Bigsby supported this view when he commented that the vagueness of the commitments to which Odet’s protagonists “awake” is striking. They turn their back on poverty, injustice and violence he argued, but the world to which they turn their faces is a blur of light. It is negatively defined in that it is everything the old- world was not. They have learned the need for conversion, but there is no agency for that conversion, no object of worship, no creed, no sacraments, no icons, no mechanism to turn the moment of conversion into a dedicated life. **28**

This is why these two radicals of the Popular Front (Miller and Odets) wrote stories of moral transformation. The importance of conversion experience to the study of Miller is to be found in his use of this dramatic structure in many of his now famous later plays. It would be incorrect to assume that because Miller (like virtually every other Popular Front radical) moved away from the politically simplistic slogans and analysis of the decade, that he also abandoned the dramatic technique of taking his

characters through a transformation that shattered their previously held attitudes and values. It would be equally false to conclude that because Americans (after 1945) were no longer forced by economic necessity to contemplate profound social change that Miller, strongly influenced by the Popular Front period, discarded his desire to see them change as a result of their own moral will. To conclude this would be to misunderstand some of the most important origins of Miller's dramatic preoccupations. Like many other liberal intellectuals with (radical vocabularies) however, both Odets and Miller were also guilty of greatly desiring the world they denounced in their work. Both playwrights and doubtless other liberals (like Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald) were in the precarious position of seeking financial and social success through condemning a society in which people were required to seek financial and social success. How interesting that both Miller and Odets ended up with Hollywood playing a major factor in their lives. (Odets leaving the theatre to write lucrative film scripts in California and Miller by marrying the Hollywood icon, Marilyn Monroe). **29**

Thus, the Popular Front era was witness to a profound (though short-lived) redefinition of the purpose and function of the artist in America. The economic reality of the Depression gave urgency to the rejection of the traditional definition of art as a form of personal expression on the part of an individual who operated beyond the influence of a corrupting society. The decade of the 1930's called upon the writers and artists to assume the responsibility they had to make their art relevant to the social reality of the times. It was not possible for an artist with any sense of social

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responsibility to somehow pretend that there was “non-political” art or that any real human insight could result without full participation in the political life of the nation. An artist could now be measured by the social utility of his work and the quality of that work would increase as he gained an understanding of the relationship between people and contemporary events. If art could be used as a weapon to discredit pecuniary culture and offer Americans an alternative to the traditional values and life-style of the middle class, then perhaps the way could be paved for substantial political changes. Art was a wonderful way of getting the American people to understand intuitively that the pursuit of wealth and the necessity of competition were not unalterable aspects of life. Writers were energized by the new realization that changes in cultural attitudes had to precede political actions and art was the most effective way of allowing people to see their lives in perspective. The effect that destructive attitudes and values had on the lives of real people could now be the subject of the art object itself and provide limitless number of opportunities for writers to support the struggle of working men and women and all Americans.

Thus the role of the artist in the Popular Front period was not simply to comment on American life, but to shape ideas and values. This assault on what most people believed was right and good constituted the moral radicalism of the era. The modern writer and artist was now charged with the responsibility of engaging the current realities and inspiring people to act in opposition to the forces that inhibited their freedom and happiness. The times demanded that an artist be an intellectual, an activist and a fully invested member of the community. The disdain that Arthur Miller

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has always had for the theatrical avant-garde and the Absurd resonates with the spirit of the Popular Front when he condemns the inability of plays of this sort to make any attempt to assert meaning from social experience.

The prevailing energy of the Popular Front therefore demanded that art provide moral guidance and provide a framework that would allow people to understand the social, cultural and political significance of the disaster that was afflicting the nation. Of particular value in understanding the career of Miller is what Granville Hicks called the need for, “a coherent philosophy and systematic point of view” that would lead intellectuals to “perceive the hidden pattern beneath the obvious chaos of American life.”³⁰ Later, Miller would use virtually the same words when he declared that, “the great writer is a destroyer of chaos, a man privy to the hidden laws that bind us all and destroy us if we do not know them.”³¹ “I have shown a preference for plays which seek causation not only in psychology but in society,” Miller said in 1957, “(because) I believe in the autonomy of art.”³² In this he speaks with the voice of the Popular Front that urged its writers and artists to expose the false values that lay behind American institutions and customs.

Without question, Miller’s early plays, like many books and plays written in the decade of the 1930’s, were sharply critical of American society and held the nation’s misguided attachment to capitalism responsible for the desperate situation. These works asked probing questions about the nature of American attitudes, values and institutions that challenged the belief in the American Dream. Yet unlike the themes

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of personal alienation and the rise of the corporate man that dominated American literature during the 1950's, the Popular Front period confronted the nation with searching questions that presupposed that an answer and a solution existed. Instead of merely " spelling out the anatomy of disaster," (as is typical of modernist literary trends such as absurdism and the pessimism and nihilism of the avant-garde) Miller would later argue, "art must illustrate a principle of living, illuminate the ethical and point to a completely believed vision of man's great possibilities." **33**. It was the optimistic belief that a more humane and democratic society could and would evolve that fueled the work of Popular Front intellectuals in condemning the kind of capitalism that was responsible for the pervasive atmosphere of breakdown, dislocation and chaos. It was the confident tenet of the Popular Front radical that individual freedom and human fulfillment were not inconsistent with class-consciousness and communal action. It was the positive expectation that intellectuals could assume a new role in America, where their work would help change the way people saw themselves and the world. It was an extraordinary sense of empowerment that led Popular Front radicals to believe that by shifting American's attention from material to more collective and spiritual concerns, a fundamental change would take place in the nation's institutions and in the personal identities of its people. **34**

The Popular Front period was a perfect expression of Miller's intellectual and philosophical orientation to the world, and he has never really abandoned the moral objections to American society that appeared in his very first plays. Unfortunately for Miller, many intellectuals did not retain the point of view of the Popular Front period

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and as America turned to other concerns after the War, he was left to muse that, “I could not hear the tempo of the times anymore.” **35** The voice of the Popular Front radical permeates the plays and essays of Miller to the present day. An examination of the plays themselves provides ample evidence of the development of his major thematic preoccupations and also tells the story of both the evolution of his craft and the continuity of his ideas.

ENDNOTES

1. An interesting analysis of the non-Communist (or rather non-Stalinist) radical Left who refused to support the Popular Front or the New Deal is contained in Gilbert's book, *Writers and Partisans*. Especially interesting are the condemnations found in "*Partisan Review*" of the Popular Front. A 1937 article noted that "in the two years from the time of the announcement of the PF to the second American Writers Conference (1937), the Communists have changed from promoting a revolutionary culture to supporting any existing institutions that might oppose Fascism."
2. Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 101-102.
3. Stanley Coben, Ed, *The Development of an American Culture*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970), pp. 184-196.
4. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, (New York: Verso, 2000), p. XVII. Denning elaborates on these ideas by pointing out that interpretation of the 1930's as a conservative decade ignores the profound impact on mass culture of Popular Front rhetoric. "I will argue that the aesthetic innovations of the cultural front wrestled with the cultural contradictions of modernity, and led to

a laboring of American culture,” he says on page 117. This redefinition of culture “informed the most powerful and lasting works of twentieth-century American fiction, music, theatre, and film as well as the cultural criticism and theory that surrounded them.” Denning is persuasive in his argument that mass culture adopted the essence of Popular Front cultural politics and therefore he cannot agree with Susman that the discovery of culture had more conservative than radical results.

5. This moral fervor took on the character of a religious surrogate for many intellectuals. In discussing Communism and the PF, Kenneth Burke said, “as for the charge that I made Communism appear like a religion, I take the two to be alike in so far as both are systems for binding people together. Let us say Communism is an ethic, a morality. But when you talk about an ethic, you must talk about much the same sort of things as you would if you were talking purely and simply about religion.”
6. Frank Warren in his book *Liberals and Communism* makes several provocative points about the significance of Russia to liberal intellectuals. He point out that the solicitous concern with Russia in the years 1935-1937 was the result of it being perceived as being the only country truly seeking peace, as the only government committed to anti-Fascism and the fact the new Soviet Constitution of 1936 declared that the dictatorship was voluntarily abdicating in favor of democracy. There was a large body of liberal opinion, he states

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that was extremely indulgent where Russia was concerned, very susceptible to Communist arguments and unwilling to apply the same critical standards to Russia as it did the U.S. Much of the reason for this according to Warren lay in the liberal Left-right world-view. To place Russia on the Left was to endow her actions with a pragmatic character. But they too did not wholly grasp the fact, Warren asserts, that the Left-Right division of the world meant nothing when applied to Stalinist totalitarianism. But for many liberals, Russia was an emotional bulwark in which one could rest hope and confidence. If one understands the emotional prop that Russia offered to the liberal living during the Depression, Warren reasons, then one has part of the reason for many liberals refusal to face the reality of Russia. To surrender Russia was to be thrown back on oneself.

7. *Timebends* p. 341.

8. C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 131. As an example, Chris Keller in *All My Sons* drives his father to suicide by exposing the moral bankruptcy of Joe's actions yet never seems to realize that he remains within the social system that fostered this immorality. Miller's response to this criticism was characteristic of Popular Front radicalism. "I believed then," he said, "that with a sufficient amount of rigorousness those crimes could be resisted."

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9. Pells, p. 98.

10. Ibid., p. 100. See Waldo Frank, *The re-discovery of America*, (New York:

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929). Frank published this philosophy of American life nearly a year before the Crash. His philosophical objective is to suggest

the potentialities for a new synthesis of creative forces that will resolve what

he refers to as "the chaos of American life." In this three- part book he

contends that America has become the "grave of Europe" the repository of the

failed aspects of European culture that have been transplanted to this country.

This leads to an analysis of contemporary American life and the dissection of

the American mind and social institutions in which he chooses the image of

the jungle to symbolize the cultural condition. He portrays the impact of

America's materialistic concept of progress as ensnaring the individual in a

struggle for power as the only means of achieving personal fulfillment.

Anticipating the spirit of the Popular Front, Frank argues that America's

salvation from chaos will be a profound change in cultural attitude in which

the idea of group identity and group action will prevail over crass

individualism. Free of the need for personal aggrandizement and sustained by

his sense of cosmos within himself, he reasons, the new man will grow aware

of others like himself in the American chaos and will commune and converge

with them to create a group, which in turn will beget groups like it. His image

of a group America will result in a more creative nation that can save itself from cultural disintegration and rediscover its great possibilities. For an excellent discussion of the significance of this book see, Paul Carter, *Waldo Frank*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), pp. 80-91.

11. Herbert Agar, *Who Owns America*, quoted in Coben, p. 213.

12. Pells, p. 101

13. See George Soule's chapter on radicalism from *America Now* by Harold E. Stearns, Ed, (New York: Literary Guild of America, 1938), p. 260.

14. Robert Crunden, *From Self to Society* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), pp. 129-130. It was not only artists and writers who, like John Dewey believed that an individual could change his character and values given the proper environment. A fascinating and important book on the social and cultural origins of neurosis, (that argued for the importance of changing society as a means of successful psychotherapy), was written in 1937 by Karen Horney. In her book, *The Neurotic Personality of our Time*, this student of Freud argued that Protestant Christian Capitalism was a system in which men compete against one another even as they are commanded to love one another. The psychic result from this situation is a diffuse tension between isolated individuals. In her analysis of socially derived neurotic tendencies,

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she speculates that the individual finds that he is always competing and is frequently unsure of himself or his ability or position. He therefore cannot count on the affection he needs, because he is always afraid someone might be getting ahead of him. He then becomes fearful and anxious and feels increasingly isolated and seeks love in one form or another and cannot always find it. The neurosis is his involuntary attempt at psychic self-protection. This evaluation of neurosis and its social derivation could easily pass as a character summary of Willy Loman in Miller's 1949 play, *Death of a Salesman*. Her ideas presupposed an environment in which people of good will, education and effort could become socially better adjusted to themselves and their culture. In other words, knowledge and insight would make them healthier. This optimism was characteristic of the Popular Front period and did not survive the coming of war and the subsequent reorientation of the country's preoccupations. Yet Arthur Miller's entire career has been shaped by the optimistic assumption that by pointing the finger of moral judgment at the American economic and social system and its (often destructive) effect on the individual, he is engaged in using art to make people healthier. To Miller, this is a subversive activity, a radical activity because it calls our basic values into question presupposing that we want to look at them and will value somehow from the examination.

16. See, *America Now*, p. 81. In the next chapter we will see evidence of this.

Miller's early plays closely resemble those of Odets and many other less skilled playwrights of the period in which characters continually branded themselves Marxists.

17. Late in 1935 the League of American Writers still hoping to publish an official magazine considered merging with *Partisan*. Members of the executive committee of the League opposed such a move because the magazine was "too left." The *Partisan* was still committed to revolutionary literature and to a Marxian interpretation of culture, whereas the most important left organizations of writers had absorbed the less openly radical tactics implied by the PF. So plans were then made to merge *Partisan Review* with Jack Conroy's *Anvil* magazine with the justification that the strong elements of one publication would complement those of the other. Gilbert pp. 142-143.

18. Gilbert, pp. 145-146

19. Ibid., pp. 152-153

20. Pells p. 123

21. Ibid., p. 139

22. An excellent example would be *Peace on Earth* by George Sklar and Albert Maltz. "This play concerned the conversion of a middle-class professor into a martyr for the cause of organized labor. By presenting him as supporting workers who are striking as a means of protesting against the sale of weapons to foreign countries, the authors manage to combine a number of favorite themes of 1930's drama. Thus the play is pro-union, anti-war and suspicious of technology and those who control it. It implicitly calls for an alliance between workers and intellectuals, and insists on the impossibility of remaining detached and objective. While one Broadway reviewer objected that far from being martyred, university professors were now running the country under FDR, the choice of a middle-class protagonist was finely calculated to appeal to the theatre's double audience." Bigsby p. 205

23. Waldo Frank, "Treason of the Intellectuals," *Modern Quarterly*, Spring 1929.
Bigsby p.129.

24. Bigsby p. 162.

25. *Timebends*, p. 232.

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26. Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 148.

27. Bigsby p. 171.

28. Ibid., p. 177.

29. James Atlas, *Bellow*, (New York, Random House, 2000) pp. 65-66. Both men had plenty of company in the way in which the powerful radical rhetoric and vague political of the Popular Front appealed to them. Saul Bellow for example, born the same year as Miller, traveled a remarkably similar intellectual route. In his student years, Bellow was a self-proclaimed socialist and member of various radical organizations who even traveled to Mexico City to visit with Trotsky. Yet in his own words he typifies the peculiar nature of the radicalism shared by so many on the Left. "In general I would say be a revolutionist," he said in 1937, although being a revolutionist apparently wasn't synonymous with fomenting revolution. Politics was "only one function of a person's humanity," Bellow proclaimed, "The forms outside do not assure a manhood of the man." The correct political belief for Bellow secures nothing. "It is necessary to be a revolutionist," he states, " but I would deny that I was less one because I do not participate in a political movement." Only one more example of the unique definition of radicalism and revolutionary identity for writers and artists of the Popular Front.

30. P

31. T

32. Ib

33. Ib

34. Po

35. T

30. Pells p. 173.

31. *Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, p. 180.

32. Ibid., p. 150.

33. Ibid. pp 9-10.

34. Pells p. 366.

35. *Timebends* p. 445.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SEEDS ARE PLANTED:

THE ABE SIMON TRILOGY

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Arthur Miller began his playwriting career while still an undergraduate, writing a play called, *No Villain* in 1936, which was revised in 1937 to become *They Too Arise* and the play found final form in a 1939 version called, *The Grass Still Grows*. These plays all concern the family of clothing manufacturer, Abe Simon, and Abe's desperate attempt to save the family business from collapse. The first two versions were completed while Miller was at the University of Michigan and the final play was crafted in New York. The only production of any of these plays was the 1938 staging by the Federal Theatre in Detroit of *They Too Arise*.

Also while a student, in 1937, the University honored Miller with the Hopwood Award In Drama for his play *Honors at Dawn*. This play dealt with a deadly labor strike, but was the least like any other of his plays. That next year found Miller visiting the Jackson (Michigan) State Prison where he used his observations and experiences to craft his next play, *The Great Disobedience*.

After graduating from the University of Michigan and moving to New York, Miller wrote two more plays that preceded his first Broadway offering, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* in 1944. *The Golden Years* is a quite substantial work that deals with the titanic clash between Cortes and Montezuma. This play finished in 1940 occupied Miller for the better part of two years and is the subject of analysis in the following chapter. The final unpublished work is the poorly crafted, *The Half-Bridge* that was completed in 1943. The play has some significance for tracing the themes that dominate Miller's work, but the drama is without any other value.

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This chapter will be devoted to a close reading of the Abe Simon trilogy and the identification of the major themes and preoccupations of the young Miller. In particular, I focus on the plot development of *No Villain* because it so closely resembles the story line of the two plays that follow. Later chapters will then attempt to identify the integration of these thematic elements in his plays, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Crucible*. Contained in this first play are many of the characteristics and essential themes of Miller's mature works. As is true with virtually all his later plays, the story centers on a family, and the plot revolves around the relationship between a father and his two sons and confronts them with a moral dilemma springing from a crisis in the family business. In Abe Simon we see many of the same things we associate with Joe Keller in *All My Sons* and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Embedded in these plays is a Popular Front viewpoint that Miller has maintained throughout his career.

No Villain received a minor award in Drama from the University of Michigan, winning for Miller a prize of \$250.00. As welcome as this money must have been to someone who had to work to pay tuition, it might have struck Miller as ironic that his play resulted in a financial reward. On the dedication page, the author has included a quote from Friedrich Engels, vilifying the capitalist class as exploiting workers by "making itself the indispensable mediator between every two producers." Yet Miller chose not to write about the exploited masses but instead focused his artistic attention

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on the struggles of the manager class who “stand deserted, waiting to return from whence they came or else to die.”

Unlike other authors of the period, the young Arthur Miller dedicated his play not to the working class and the anger and economic deprivation consuming their lives, but to people like his father, members of what Miller saw as the bosses, the business owners. *No Villain* is the story of Abe Simon and the family coat business to which he had dedicated his life. It is also the story of his two sons, Ben and Arnold, who found themselves trapped between loyalty to their father, on one hand, and powerful empathy for the desperation of the workers, on the other.

This dramatic structure that places emphasis on the process of decision making by the major character(s) is one that Miller uses in virtually every major play from *No Villain* in 1936 to *Broken Glass* in 1995. Further, the basic situation of *No Villain* where the characters are torn between the competing loyalties of family business and social responsibility is a conflict that Miller repeats, reworked and intensified in four plays spanning thirteen years, ending with the great masterpiece, *Death of a Salesman*.

The setting for *No Villain* is the parlor of a “small six-room house in a suburb of New York City.” As will be the case in almost every play until *The Crucible*, Miller begins by introducing us to a contemporary American family. It is late at night and Abe Simon, his wife Esther, his eldest son, Ben, and his daughter, Maxine, are waiting up

for the expected arrival of the younger son, Arnold who is returning from college in Michigan. The impending arrival of Arnold has created tension in the house, and as the hour grows later, interpersonal conflicts begin to surface.

Because he has no money for transportation, Arnold is hitchhiking back to New York (which Miller did many times during his days at Michigan) and this has thrown Esther into a near panic. As the family teases her about her excessive worry she defends her concern and lashes out at Abe for his inability to “even afford to send him bus fare.” But it is more than bus fare that is on Esther’s mind. She begins to lament that the University of Michigan has filled Arnold full of “communistic ideas,” and she predicts that he has been caught up in student strikes and will inform them that he has been expelled from school. The rest of the family cannot suppress their laughter as she wails, “first he’s a Communist, second of all he has no money and then he’s on the open road!”

Although this is dramatically a clumsy way to introduce the play’s political component, an important dynamic is evident in the opening scene of Miller’s very first play that will characterize much of his more famous writing. The first scene articulates the basic conflict in the play. *No Villain*, like *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* which follow it, is a play in which a family is torn apart by competing values. The Simon family is split along generational lines on attitudes about politics, the economic situation, college life, workers, strikes and most everything else. Abe Simon personifies the values associated with the building of the family business and

the world he made for Esther and his children. This world exploded when the Depression came and the coat business (and the entire Simon family) has undergone a tremendous shock from which it has not recovered. In *No Villain*, the Depression functions as the emotional “pressure cooker” that gives urgency and intensity to the interpersonal relationships and conflicts.

By beginning the play prior to Arnold’s arrival, Miller has provided the family the opportunity to discuss the ideas and values apparently possessed by Arnold. The way each character feels about Arnold generally defines how everyone feels about the social and economic forces at work in the country. It also allows us to focus on Ben, the major character in this play, and the personal dilemma he faces. As his father’s chief assistant in the family coat business, Ben is invested in the survival of the company during these perilous times. At the same time however, Ben fights feelings of resentment that working for his father has destroyed his dream of attending college and building his own career. He also is unable to ignore the impact of hard times on the company’s workers and is unable to completely accept his identity as a manager whose interests are not those of the laboring man. This ambivalence constitutes the major dramatic question of the play, which is, what will Ben decide to do about the situation.

Beginning the play on the night Arnold returns is not the only vehicle for exposing the clash of values within the family. Miller has also heightened the dramatic tension by making this the day that the shipping clerks have gone on strike in New York.

Large numbers of these workers are congregating on Seventh Avenue during the various coat manufacturers to cross their picket lines to deliver goods. If the coats cannot be delivered, Abe's company will soon be out of business, and thus Abe and Ben realize that they will have to pack and ship the stock themselves. As soon as he returns, Arnold will also be expected to help get the coats to the buyers. The strike forces all three characters to act on their principles rather than just argue about them. *No Villain*, despite being Arthur Miller's earliest attempt at playwriting, has the same signature as his mature works; namely, the dramatic action centers on a moral choice made by the central character which both defines that character and constitutes the significance of the play.

As the family continues to wait for Arnold's arrival, Esther's anxiety about his need to hitchhike causes her to harpoon her husband, blaming Abe for forcing Arnold to endanger himself. "Sure, I know you want to send him money," Esther berates Abe, "he's too fine a boy to ask when he knows his Father hasn't got any." Abe responds by saying, "what am I supposed to do Esther...make it?" The exchange ends with Esther in tears saying, "fine thing, Abe Simon can't send his son money to come home." For Esther, Arnold's return is another reminder of the shame she feels about the economic decline of the family. Esther has never been able to recover from the loss of prestige and comfort that affluence had given her prior to the Depression. Her excessive worry about Arnold is a subtle but powerful way of making Abe responsible for the situation they all face.

Even Maxine who is only thirteen can remember the days when Abe brought home "hundred dollar toys for Army" and yet now she gets nothing, "not even coats from downtown." Maxine then begs Esther for piano lessons, which brings another round of recriminations about the lack of money. Finally in exasperation Ben implores his mother to accept the fact that they have no money and are now poor. "You're living today not ten years ago," he tells her, "if you'd stop trying to get rich and start living maybe you could be happy... forget it!" The scene culminates with Esther's reply, "Sure it's easy for you to forget, you've got nothing to remember."

Suddenly, the tension is broken as a noise is heard outside and everyone celebrates the arrival of Arnold, only to find instead that Grandfather Barnett is coming through the door. Michael Barnett is the most unusual of all Miller characters in the plays between 1936 and the opening of *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. In the first place, he is the only overtly Jewish individual in any of these plays. In a way strikingly similar to the character of Jacob in Odet's play, *Awake and Sing*, Barnett seems to come from another time and is a personification of "old world" values and perspectives. Much of Barnett's speech contains the rhythms and word order of Yiddish and Barnett (having just come from a schul) is the only openly religious character, in Miller's early works. There seems to be no particular thematic significance to this beyond the obvious use of Miller's own grandfather as a model for Barnett. Still it is interesting that no character except this old man in any of Miller's plays before *The Crucible* engages in religious practice or discussion.

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Grandfather Barnett is also caught up in the economic disaster that surrounds the Simon family. The Depression has destroyed the Michael Barnett Clothing Company, leaving him without a home, dependent on his children for support. His presence in the already crowded household has created tension and now that Arnold is returning there is literally not enough room for everyone to sleep. Esther and Abe begin to argue over how long Barnett will stay with them and the guilt Esther feels about not having the money to support her father brings out a whole new wave of assigning responsibility to Abe for her unhappiness.

So, Miller has painted a picture of what the Depression has done to this particular family. It has reduced these people to living in cramped conditions together, in fear and despair about the future, longing for the past and blaming each other for the current state of things. The family is consumed with making it through the next day and although Michael Barnett can find in religion a way out of things, the rest of the family seems to have no hope of salvation. It is Arnold and the “new ideas” he has learned in college that provides the only real excitement that the family has for the days ahead. Although all the exciting things Arthur is learning with his college education fascinate Esther, she also knows that he has “written articles for that Communist paper” and fears that this will cause him to be expelled. Confused by all these political terms, Abe asks Ben “what is this, communist?”

Ben’s explanation to his father is the closest Miller comes to any of his characters engaging in or even suggesting radical change of a political nature. With the possible

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exception of Max Zibriski in *Honors at Dawn*, this is the only Miller character that actually articulates or envisions a new socio-political reality for America.

Ben: Maybe it's about time you knew what a communist is. You've got a whole shop full of them so you'd better find out now. Communists believe that the means of production- the shops, the machines, the utility companies, you know electric, gas...

Abe: Yeh, yeh

Ben: They want all these productive items to be run by the workers without anyone owning these things himself.

Abe: So, who's boss?

Ben: The workers choose their own bosses but the bosses don't own any part of the machines the workers don't also share. In other words there's no profits for a boss. It all goes to the workers.

Abe: So what becomes of people like us?

Ben: People like us? Who cares what becomes of people like us? We had the party the last three hundred years, now it's their turn. You'd probably be a worker who does the buying on a salary.

Abe: So. So what does Army want with it? What...

Ben: Well, you see the way the world is going to pot. He sees it too. There're no places in the world for college men anymore. The system has no more use for culture, you know, for music, for writers, for many doctors we need. So Army wants to change it to a different system where we may be able to use these

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people, these things. In Russia they have the communist system. In Russia they seem to be better off than before. You've seen them, when the operators struck last year, remember the big flags they had with the hammer and sickle painted on in red? You know, one of those curved grass cutters and a hammer inside it?

Abe: Oh! The strikers! So if Arny was there he wouldn't run a machine, he'd go downstairs and walk around with them?

Ben: Well, they believe that the workers have to organize solidly and finally overturn the present system.

At the end of this exchange Abe asks Ben, "is communism a right way to live?"

Ben replies to his father, "better men than you are asking the question."

These words would certainly seem to suggest that Ben's frustrations are leading him to some decisive course of action. What else could he be suggesting when he says that "in Russia they seem to be better off than before? Yet within one page Ben is deriding Abe's suggestion that the universities are teaching communism and instead belittles people who call anyone who thinks for himself a Red. What seems to concern Ben the most is not the revolutionary implications of Communism, but rather his father's propensity to associate himself with those who oppose these new ideas. "You sound as though you had something to lose, you sound like Hearst," Ben says to his father. Again, what seems to agitate Ben is his father's vision of himself as a man of wealth, a boss. He makes no real attempt to educate or persuade Abe to act in any way, but seems satisfied to punish his father for his ignorance.

What takes place next is one of the most important events in all of Miller's early works. Abe asks Ben a question that will forever be associated with the plays of Arthur Miller. It is a question that thirteen years later Miller in his essay, "The Nature of Tragedy" will identify as something that a tragedy asks that differentiates it from pathos or melodrama. Interestingly, it is the same question that Irving Howe in his book, "World of Our Fathers" suggests is the primary contribution of the Yiddish tradition to Jewish intellectual life. "Well is that right" Abe asks his son, "is communism a **right way to live?**" "Who knows" replies Ben, "better men than you are asking the question." 1

Perhaps the identification of Miller as a Popular Front radical could be best demonstrated by this exchange. From his very first play, Miller established, like many other left-liberals in the Popular Front period, that his primary interest was not in communism or economics or political action of any particular sort. His revolutionary idea, as expressed through Ben, was not the suggestion of a new social system, but rather the rejection of a culture that had stopped asking the question, what is the right way to live in the world. From the point of view of the Popular Front, this was a radical perhaps even a revolutionary social attack by Miller. The questioning of the system was the radical act and this dramatization of the essential immorality of the American social and economic system is what marks it as a product of the Popular Front viewpoint. I am arguing that each of his great plays posits this basic question. What Abe asks his son in this play is the same question that Willy Loman asks his

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brother Ben in *Death of a Salesman*. “What’s the answer,” Willy asks Ben, searching for the right life philosophy to give to his children, “ how should I teach them?” 2

Esther now changes the direction of conversation by introducing her own way of rescuing the family from the current disaster. She asks Ben why he hasn’t asked Helen Roth out for a date. This topic immediately interests Abe who comments that Helen is a wonderful girl and likes Ben very much. Ignoring Ben’s protests, his parents continue to push the idea. Helen’s father is very interested in a son-in-law to take over the family business. Mr. Roth “has got a million-dollar firm there Ben,” says Abe, “I’m not pushing you, I’m just looking out for...” Abe never finishes the sentence because now the door swings open and the long awaited Arnold plunks his college-labeled valise on the floor and enters the house.

The coming home of the “prodigal son” and the subsequent tensions created by his presence is a common occurrence in the plays of Arthur Miller. It is the return home of both Chris Keller in *All My Sons* and Biff Loman in *Death of a Salesman* that results in the tragic events of those plays. In *No Villain*, the return of Arnold Simon makes the status quo impossible and results not in a tragedy but in a transformation. It is the presence of Arnold that is the vehicle for the eventual revolution of conscience in his brother, Ben.

After a brief scene of greeting and hearing the details of Arnold’s trip home, the family begins to prepare for bed. Esther and Abe engage in a spirited debate over

where Grandfather Barnett is going to sleep. Esther rejects the idea of her father sleeping on the couch, “He’s got a bad heart, you’ll kill him Abe” she says. Abe counters by saying that “I ain’t no villain, Esther, I want my house to be mine, my son comes home there ain’t place to sleep, what kind of business is this?” “What do you want me to do, kill myself?” Esther replies. Once again the economic situation is the real source of conflict between characters. Neither Abe nor Esther can act in the present without comparing it to the past, and the resentment, fear and guilt they feel is the direct result of their inability to accept the current situation made unbearable by tight, cramped conditions.

The first act ends with Esther offering them a nightcap of cake and coffee and the family filing out into the dining room. The chanted prayers of grandfather Barnett who is praying over the candles stops their progress however. He “sways faster, driving himself to greater volume until he reaches a crescendo” as he sings, “Odonoi Ellohaynu,” (Miller’s spelling) his call to the Lord. Miller has chosen an interesting way here of commenting on the clash of value systems in the household. Barnett’s prayers serve as a powerful contrast between the material strivings of the family and the yearning for spiritual fulfillment. It is most impressive that a first time playwright would be able to find such a highly effective dramatic symbol that the Abe Simon family is not focused on what ultimately is most important.

The first act of *No Villain* exposes the interpersonal conflicts within the family that are exacerbated by the desperate financial situation. The second act shifts to the

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factory and show room of the Simon Coat and Suit Company. The act begins with Abe and Ben trying to figure out how to keep the business going when the shipping clerks are striking. It is nearly an impossible task to attempt to deliver coats by breaking through the strikers lines and the frustration of seeing his garments piling up with no ability to get them to the buyers, causes Abe to erupt in anger. "In my day we would get it through," he says to Ben and then orders one of his employees to get ready to attempt a delivery. "In your day, shipping clerks didn't form unions," Ben replies, "you and the rest of the manufacturers had better recognize them soon or there'll be blood running in the streets."

Despite the fact that the strikers are throwing acid at scabs, Ben sends the boy out with the coats and says to his father, "I sent that kid out there with fifty dollars of crap to get killed maybe, I'm the villain now." "Why must I do this, why must you do this," Ben anguishes, "I guess you can't be a human being in this business."

Obviously Miller has Ben asks these questions because he will soon discover the answer himself. But Abe simply cannot grasp what Ben is struggling with and challenges him, "You got to be a man in this business, in any business, if you don't get them they'll get you." "its dog eat dog," Abe lectures his son, "you oughta know that by now." Ben looks at his father and responds, "yeh...I oughta know that by now.

Just as Ben seems on the edge of doing something drastic, the word comes to them that the deliveryman has been unsuccessful, and Abe is forced to call the company for

which the coats were intended and beg them not to cancel the order. At this desperate moment, a “loudly dressed, wordly-gaited man” comes into the shop with a leather folder in his hand. This is the powerful coat buyer, Mr. Dawson, who is trying to find a manufacturer willing and able to break through the strikers and deliver a large amount of goods. In a long scene that was obviously drawn from Miller’s personal experiences in his father’s business, Dawson offers Abe a huge contract of two hundred- fifty coats, provided they be delivered in twenty-four hours.

Miller has now created a moral dilemma for both Abe and Ben. Dawson has given them the opportunity to choose between two courses of action. Will they act in their own narrow self interest or finally acknowledge that they owe a larger obligation to the human rights of the workers striking right outside their door? But for Abe, ethical issues are impractical and when Ben tries to raise them, Abe cuts him off saying, “this ain’t no college, this is business, cut or get cut.” Ben then refuses to let Abe call Arnold at home and get him to help pack coats for the big order because it will violate Arnold’s principles. The scene closes with a bewildered Abe expressing his contempt for people who get educated and develop principles in order to avoid work.

“Everybody got principles now-a-days, only I ain’t got em,” Abe wails, “but who can tell, maybe if I get em..maybe even I won’t have to work.” Ben mutters a response, “yep, Mr. Simon, the place is lousy with principles.”

While this is going on at the factory, Arnold and his mother are having a conversation at home that opens Act II, scene II. As the scene progresses, Esther shares her anxiety

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about the business telling Arnold that the bank loan is overdue and there seems no way that Abe can make the payment. "Abe Simon has to start all over again," she says, "another man would have committed suicide long ago." As Arnold tries to comfort her, Esther reveals her dreams for his future. "All my life I saved to send you boys to college (to) make yourself respected," she tells Arnold, "you'll make money, you'll have a good wife.. some day you'll be a big man Arny."

Arnold tries to convince her that "the world is different now than when you were young." He tells her that she strives too much for "wealth, and clothes and a car and God knows what." "You've got to get out and on top and look down, and see what one thing is worth against another," he says, "we've got to change the world mother, it's old beyond its years." Esther does not ask Arnold to be more specific by outlining exactly how he wants to change the world. Arnold clearly wants Esther to value something other than material things and the implication is that once she begins to do that, the world will change somehow.

This general discomfort with the values associated with commerce and bourgeoisie culture connects Arnold and Ben with Chris Keller in *All My Sons* and Biff Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Both Chris and Biff are unhappy with the way their parents think about the world for many of the same reasons articulated by Arnold in this scene. Much like Arnold, Chris is aware that something must change, but isn't very specific about the nature of that change. In *Death of a Salesman*, Biff Loman suffers from the same essential struggle as Chris Keller. Competing voices in his own mind

push and pull him in opposite directions. Whereas in *No Villain* these “voices” are separate characters, in this play they are at war inside Biff. Esther and Arnold are competing within the psyche of Biff Loman for the possession of his soul and he expresses this fact to his brother. “I’m thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin my future,” he tells his brother, “ I’ve always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here I know all I’ve done is waste my life.”³

All this talk about changing the world makes Esther frightfully nervous and she urges Arnold to go to the plant to help his father, “You don’t have to stay there all your life, just a few days Army,” she tells her son, “you’ve got to realize you’re the son of the owner, the boss, not the working people.” When Arnold evades this request, Esther attacks the “Communitic” books he reads at college and says to him, “ you can read those books, but you don’t have to live by them.” Reaching a level of hysteria at the end of the scene, Esther bellows, “God in Heaven, what makes us move like this, where we don’t want to go?” “My good God,” Esther sobs, “why do we deserve this?”

Although the crafting of the play is unskilled and many of the speeches forced, the young Miller has established the basic framework and many of the dramatic ideas that he will use later in both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. He has already developed the ability to create a plot in which a moral dilemma exists and the characters are forced to line up on one side or the other. Miller uses the strike not as an opportunity to make a political statement but rather as a metaphor for exposing the

crisis of values within the main characters. How Abe and Ben will respond to the strike is more important to Miller than what the strike is about. The same is true for Chris and Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, who define themselves by how they respond to the shipping of defective airplane engines. In order to save the family business (a moral necessity in their minds) Joe Keller and Abe Simon are forced to make a decision that is immoral in the eyes of their children. This basic “signature” of an Arthur Miller play is already evident in *No Villain*.

The final act of *No Villain* begins with a joyous Abe returning home to tell Esther of the huge order from Dawson. He exaggerates the actual size of the order, telling her it was five hundred coats instead of two hundred fifty. In this way he closely resembles Willy Loman, who habitually fibbed to his wife Linda about the amount of merchandize he sold on his sales trips. As the family gets ready for the evening meal, Ben and Arnold have a conversation about the strike. “Are they going to win?” Arnold asks Ben. “They deserve to, but they can’t make it last long enough,” Ben says to his brother,” because a few hundred Ben Simons carried checks to the Manufacturers’ Protective Association today.” When Arnold asks Ben why he would participate in hiring thugs to break a strike, Ben replies, “ It’s a war, we can’t fight without brutes.” Arnold is aghast that Ben would sell his soul for the sake of a big order, especially since Ben, unlike Abe, understands the moral consequences of what he is doing. This makes Ben feel both guilty and angry and he lashes out at Arnold. “ What the hell difference does it make if I know what it’s all about,” he bellows at Arnold, “ in this world it’s the side of the bread you butter that counts.”

Ben Simon knows the right course of action to take but simply lacks the courage of his convictions. In this way he is very much like Joe Mitchell, the New York cab driver who is afraid to go on strike in Clifford Odet's play, *Waiting for Lefty*. Joe Mitchell knows in his heart that his working conditions and pay scale are intolerable and that he must do something about them. But he can't seem to take the leap of faith that going on strike requires. He blames conditions, he blames the other drivers, he blames the union bosses, and he assigns blame to everything and everyone except the economic system itself. Ben is trying to find a way to support the strike without the guilt of betraying his father and endangering the family business. He has accepted the futility of fighting "the way things are" (even if they are wrong) and he uses that as an excuse to avoid courageous action.

The dramatic climax of the play now takes place when Arnold refuses both his brother and father's request to come to the plant to help pack the big order. "You've got to come down tomorrow," Ben says "we're busted if we don't deliver." "Scabbing! Do you realize what that means?" Arnold replies, "I couldn't stand straight again if I did that." Angry at Arnold's refusal to help save the business, Abe commands that Grandfather Barnett come to the plant in his son's place. This demand makes Esther hysterical, and the entire scene explodes when Barnett collapses with a heart attack.

In Scene Two of the final act, while Grandfather Barnett lies critically ill at home, Ben and Abe are in the office at the plant plotting a way of getting the coats past the strikers. Unable to find any alternatives, Ben attempts a frantic delivery himself, only to make a hasty and desperate retreat with ripped boxes and shredded coats. Compounding their problem, a representative from the bank enters and tells Abe that his credit will no longer be extended because he has failed to make deliveries. Abe protests that he has a huge order that will be filled as soon as the strike is over. The bank messenger shocks Abe by telling him that every coat manufacturer in town got the same order. "The trick was to be the one who delivered them when it was hard to," he tells Abe, "later, you'll be in the same boat as before, plenty of merchandize, no outlet."

Having been duped by both the bank and the buyer, Abe pounds his fist in a rage. Complaining that one son is a communist, one son is a quitter, and his father-in-law too old, Abe moans, "none of them got any guts, I got nobody...nobody." Once again, we see in Abe Simon the origins of what will become Joe Keller and later, Willy Loman. All three are trapped in a world they no longer understand and are fighting to preserve their families and their own sense of identity and self-worth in the face of business failure and cutthroat competition. It is important to restate that Miller is attempting to portray a heroic man with values that have been made invalid by events beyond his control. Unlike Odets, who in *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* was writing plays that directly attacked the capitalist system, Miller seems more interested in the lives of characters trapped in the economic reality.

The style of play that began to develop with *No Villain* would later characterize Miller as a unique kind of social playwright clearly differentiated from the other modern masters of social dramas. Ibsen, who clearly influenced Miller, wasn't particularly interested in the correct functioning of society, he was more interested in pointing out the incorrect functioning of society. Chekhov (and later Tennessee Williams) provides no room for political comment because he gives too much information about the characters and their problems. Strindberg was interested in society only to the extent it played a role in his own psychic turmoil and George Bernard Shaw was interested in demonstrating how society functioned to inhibit the growth of human consciousness.

Miller's dramatic method, from this first apprentice play, was derived from his life in the thirties, and in his view, articulated in the accent of that decade. The influence of his Popular Front politics on his plays caused him to see the inseparable connection between society and the individual psychology of his characters. Society was not something thrown at Abe Simon or affecting him only when he was conscious of its presence. "Society is inside man and man is inside society," said Miller "and you cannot create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not." For Miller, "the fish is in the water and the water is in the fish."⁴

As Abe is bemoaning his fate, word comes that Grandfather Barnett has died. The final scene of the play takes place back at the Simon house where “five aged, bearded men in black sway and murmur softly over the coffin.” Abe tries to comfort a grieving Esther as Ben and Arnold sit lost in their own sadness listening to the old men chanting the prayers. Suddenly, the Roth family enters to express their condolences. Soon Mr. Roth works his way over to Ben and tells him how badly he feels about the bank closing on the business. Roth then puts his arm on Ben, smiles at his daughter and says, “you know Ben, I got no son and I’m getting already a little old for my business.” Disgusted at both Roth’s timing and his motives, Ben cuts him off and begins to move away. Esther, who apparently wasn’t so lost in her grief that she didn’t have an ear trained on Roth, begins to implore Ben to change his mind. Finally the crassness of the whole scene causes Ben to explode in rage, and the play’s final moment takes place.

First Ben throws the old men out of the house and then orders Roth and his family to leave. Seeing the only chance to save the business walking out the door, Abe and Esther beg Ben to reconsider. “Ben, what are you doing?” sobs Esther as she clutches him. This prompts the final speech in the play where Ben turns to his parents and delivers his vision for the future.

Ben: For us it begins, Arny and I. For us there begins not work toward a business, but just a sort of a battle. sort of a fight. so that you’ll know that this (covers the scene with an arc motion of his hand) this will never be in our lives. We’ll never have to sit like you sit there now for the reasons you are sitting there... Dad, now we not only are working people.. we know we are.

Maybe I'm afraid.. I don't know. But I couldn't start
this thing over again. I've got to build something
bigger.. Something that won't allow this to happen..
Something that'll change this deeply.. to the bottom...
it's the only way dad.. it's the only way.

The play ends in a remarkably similar way to *Odets Awake and Sing*. In that play young Ralph has come to the same conclusion as Ben about the shameless materialism and moral bankruptcy of his family. Ralph's grandfather, Jacob tried to impart the values of socialism and social responsibility to him but was belittled as old-fashioned and naïve by the family. Realizing at the end of the play that Jacob was right and wanting to free himself from the shackles that torment his family, Ralph closes the play with this speech.

my days won't be for nothing. Let mom have the
dough. I'm twenty-two and kickin! I'll get along. Did
Jake die for us to fight about nickels? No! Awake and
Sing, he said. Right here he stood and said it. The night
he died, I saw it like a thunderbolt! I saw he was dead
and I was born! I swear to God, I'm one week old! I
want the whole city to hear it-fresh blood, arms. We got
'em. We're glad we're living. 5

It took twenty-one year old, Arthur Miller only six days to write *No Villain*, while on spring break in March of 1936. Clearly the play is an apprentice work and lacks the dramatic structure and character development necessary for the stage. Yet, the play won a Hopwood Award in Drama from the University of Michigan and this encouragement caused Miller to change his major from journalism to English in September. The English department taught theatre classes at the University and Miller was particularly eager to enroll in the playwriting class offered by Professor Kenneth Rowe.

During this transition in early 1937, Miller wrote a revised version of *No Villain* for entry into the Bureau of New Plays contest. This new version was called, *They Too Arise* and it was awarded a major prize of \$1250.00 from the Bureau and produced in late 1937 by the Federal Theatre Project in Ann Arbor and Detroit. ⁶ Although all of the characters remained the same in *They Too Arise*, Miller intensified the conflict between people and made Abe Simon the one who undergoes the transformation of consciousness. Whereas, *No Villain* is a play about what happens to Ben, this version is more concerned with what happens to Abe because of what happened to Ben. In the end of the play, it is Abe Simon who tells Esther she must forget the past in order to understand the present. *They Too Arise* ends with Abe, Ben and Arnold joining forces to say, "six strong arms and three good heads, we oughta be able to learn a lot. We can change!!" Thus the adoption of a new perspective and commitment to strong action, not just by Ben but by Abe and Arnold too (although what specific action is never articulated), is the central theme of the play.

The opening scene remains the same, as the family awaits the return of Arnold from college. Miller has developed in this version sharper conflicts between characters and the Depression is more obviously at work in the interpersonal relationships between people. Esther cannot forget what she once had and has no one to blame but Abe. She sees personal failure in her husband as the reason for the decline of the business and torments him with the success of some of his competitors. Rather than seeing his failure as the result of anything larger (i.e. the economic system) Abe feels guilty

about Esther's criticism and responds that the only business people who are prospering are the ones with criminal connections.

Also intensified in this play is the scheming of Abe and Esther to create an alliance with Sam Roth, using Ben as bait. It is much clearer that the parents are so eager to save themselves and their business that they would sacrifice Ben's happiness to accomplish it. Sam Roth is better developed in this version and has taken on a great similarity to Uncle Morty in *Awake and Sing*. It is Abe's attitude toward Roth that best symbolizes his transformation in this play. In the first act Abe refers to him as "a finer fellar don't live." The Simons are predisposed to admire Roth because he is wealthy and represents both what they aspire to be and how they wish to be perceived. All this changes dramatically by the end of the play, but for the moment a marriage between Ben and Helen is the consuming ambition of Esther and Abe.

Ben has no interest in bartering his life for the survival of the business and thus is a source of great consternation to Abe, who sees him as rejecting family traditions and values. In this version, Ben is vehement in his opposition to Abe's using Arnold to work at the plant during the strike, and Abe simply cannot understand how his sons can turn their back on the business because of their principles. Miller has done a more effective job of laying out the conflict in this version. Which is the more compelling loyalty, the play asks, duty to family or responsibility for the well being of the larger society in which we all live? This is the same basic question asked by *All My Sons*.

The three Abe Simon plays evolve into a fourth play (*All My Sons*) that introduces new characters but retains the same dramatic raw material and conflict.

The character of Arnold is also much better developed in this version. He has several confrontations with Abe, trying to get his father to see that he is in on the wrong side of the strike. In much clearer language than in *No Villain*, Arnold and Ben exhort Abe to stop identifying with values that “serve the rich and the corporations.” “The only business we get,” Arnold tells his father “are the scraps that the big city mills can’t sell to the big city coat manufacturers.” Arnold and Ben try to get Abe to see himself as oppressed and to stop serving the interests of those that oppress him. Abe sees this as “fuzzy thinking” and returns to his maxim, “This is business, and this is my business.” Arnold retorts, “your business only serves the big boys, you break the strike for them.”

The strike of the shipping clerks plays a significantly more important role in *They Too Arise* than in its predecessor. Miller’s visit to the Fisher Body sit-down strike in Flint in January 1937 undeniably influenced him in the crafting of this version and was an important factor in making this the angriest and most radical of Miller’s works. In this play, the Manufacturers Association has asked all its members to vote on the hiring of strike- breakers. By making this Association more prominently involved in the strike, Miller has forced Abe to choose which group he sees as having the most in common with himself. It is much clearer in this play that Abe has been left largely unprepared to deal with the disaster that the economic conditions have wrought. He is certainly

no villain, but he lacks any frame of reference to make what for him is the right choice. As the pressure builds from the Association to vote for strikebreakers, Abe laments, “Used to be a man minded his business and nobody bothered him.” “That was then,” Ben responds, “but we’ve got to make up our minds now!”

Just as it seems that Abe is going to decide something, he reverts to his desperate attempt to save things by trying to persuade Ben to marry Helen Roth. In a speech that will be repeated (more eloquently) in *The Grass Still Grows* and *All My Sons*, Abe tells Ben that he wants the business to be passed on to his sons. “The business is passing on my name,” Abe says to Ben, “my business is my name and you are my son.” Finally Ben relents and moves to the phone to call Roth. His love for his father has proven greater than his concern for his own career and he is prepared to sacrifice himself for the benefit of the family. This prompts an intense reaction from Arnold who says to Ben, “I know a way of living which doesn’t force a man to make the telephone call you’re about to make.” “Why are you doing this,” Arnold berates Ben, “so we can be respectable?” “We don’t need the goddamn business if this is what you have to do to keep it,” Arnold exclaims. The scene ends with Ben picking up the phone to call Roth as Abe sobs in the next room.

The most dramatic scene in *They Too Arise* is a situation not even found in *No Villain*. Act Two, Scene Two opens at a meeting of the Manufacturers Association, attended by both Abe and Ben. With the possible exception of *Honors at Dawn*, this is the only time Miller directly deals with class identity in all of his plays. Despite the

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fact that everyone in the room is a coat manufacturer, there is a clear division between the wealthy and the struggling. The chairman of the “executive council” (i.e. the rich manufacturers) announces that they have met and decided to urge the use of money from the general fund to end the strike and they are demanding a vote to support this recommendation.

As the momentum begins to gather for an affirmative vote, Ben rises to clarify what the words “end the strike” means. “What are you going to buy with this money?” he asks the council, “[is it not] the hiring of thugs to break the strike?” Ben is accused of “being a Red” as he draws a clear line in the sand over the use of strike breakers and casts his lot with the workers. “There are two kinds of men in this room,” Ben proclaims, “and money has allowed the rich [ones] to lose contact with the workers and destroy their values.” Abe desperately tries to split the difference and offer some compromise between the two sides. “I always thought most people oughta know what’s right and what’s wrong,” he says, “ but now I don’t know.” Abe is slowly realizing that breaking the strike is wrong and that this perspective is not just “some college, pie in the sky” view. In a final attempt to appeal to a sense of decency in everyone Abe says, “ maybe it [breaking the strike] is honest for the steel companies to act this way, but not Jewish men in the cloak business.” Abe’s plea is swallowed up by the shouts of the more powerful members in the room, and an enraged Ben ends the scene screaming, “Murderers!”

It is interesting that Miller has Abe make a direct reference to being “Jewish men in the cloak business.” It would be eight years before Miller directly confronted his own ethnicity in his 1945 novel, *Focus*, and twenty years before he began to write with introspection about the relationship between his ethnicity and the themes of his plays. But even in this early play he seems to suggest that there was a sense of social responsibility and moral obligation that manifested itself in Abe as a Jew feeling guilty about acting entirely in his own interests. Abe’s internal conflict was the result of his recognition that being a Jew compelled him to behave in a more humane way than his business instincts were urging him.

Even this scene at the manufacturer’s meeting is not enough for Abe to give up his desire to fill the giant order of two hundred coats. When he returns home, Abe is confronted by Esther, who works to counteract the influence that these “radical” ideas are having on him. The battle over which set of ideas will prevail becomes the subject of this scene as Esther rekindles in Abe his desire to save the business by getting the big order or convincing Ben to marry Helen Roth. Essentially Abe and Grandpa Barnett have developed a set of personal ethics based on money and business, which makes it very difficult for them to assign positive motives to the strikers or their sympathizers. Barnett says to Arnold, “the richer you get the more people will listen to what you’ve got to say, because how smart you are to people depends on how much money you have in the bank.” “I’m smarter now than when I had money,” Barnett tells his grandson, “only times ain’t changed so people will not listen to me; they are still thinking on the old standard.” Better than any other speech in the play,

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this comment by Grandpa Barnett incorporates the conflict that Miller has developed. The family is in such misery because they cling to values and dreams that are outmoded. Their enemy is not the strikers, or their financial problems, but rather their own inability to adapt to new conditions.

The play closes in much the same way as *No Villain* with the death of Barnett and the failure of Abe to deliver the coats and win the big order. In this version, however, it is Roth who wins the order by using violent strikebreaking tactics and cutthroat prices. He then moves to blackmail Abe by offering to save the business in return for Ben's engagement to Helen. Finally, Abe's eyes are completely opened to the moral depravity of what he calls "this way we got of eating each other." "What's the matter," Esther retorts, referring to Roth, "He's a crook because he's gotta make a living?" "Our boys are not going to get rich by killing," Abe says, "I've wasted my life trying to get rich,...not them!"

This statement again links Abe with Joe Keller and Willy Loman. All three fathers want desperately to pass on to their sons what they have worked for all their lives. For Abe and Joe, it is the family business that will be carried on by their sons. Though Willy Loman is a salesman and not a business owner, he also wants his sons to succeed in the way he did. But the Simon, Keller and Loman families are all torn apart by the sons being unable to accept the values given to them by their fathers. Both Abe and Joe are able to see that they have wasted their lives in pursuit of the

wrong values. Only Willy Loman clings to “old standard” and goes to his death still dreaming the same dreams.

They Too Arise ends in the same Odets-like manner with a realization of class affinity with the workers and a general call to some unspecified action. In this version, however, it is Abe who spouts the transformational language that symbolizes his rebirth. “When I see what Roth’s gotta do to stay where he is, I see it’s dirty and it has to be wiped out,” Abe says to Esther, “ I don’t know how, but I gotta do it!!” The play closes with Abe saying to a sobbing Esther, “ we can change, we gotta change, we gotta forget the past, then we’ll understand.”

The fact that *They Too Arise* is the most radical of the three Abe Simon plays is perfectly consistent with the mood of the nation in 1936 and 1937. The 1936 election campaign was carried out in a distinctly radical voice as the country began to align itself along class lines in a way never before seen in our history. “There was a strong indication,” says historian, Robert McElvaine, that socioeconomic class made a difference in 1936 as no time since at least the Jacksonian era.” McElvaine notes the overwhelming number of letters sent to FDR in 1936-37 that were tinged in class hostility. “I am in complete sympathy with your fight on greed and the favored classes,” wrote one man, “at last we have a man in the White House and not a puppet of organized wealth.” ⁷ Miller was certainly reflecting the views of many on the Popular Front left at a time when there was taking place a fundamental shift in the

political alignment with the Democratic Party becoming the dominant party. Miller wrote *They Too Arise* at precisely this moment.

Miller returned to the Abe Simon story for a third time after two very significant events in his life and another substantial change in the political mood of the country. First, he took a playwriting class from Kenneth Rowe at the University of Michigan. Secondly, Miller moved back to New York City in late 1938. Anticipating a production there by the Federal Theatre Project encouraged him to create a third version of his play. This play, called *The Grass Still Grows* was completed in 1939. The profound alterations in the script from the earlier versions reflect changes both in Miller's views and a shift in the political preoccupations of the nation between 1938 and 1939.

Two things stand out from a glance at the first page of this third version of the Abe Simon story. First, Miller has called this play a comedy. Although the basic dramatic structure of *The Grass Still Grows* resembles *No Villain*, Miller has made changes to the characters and details of the plot to make the overall effect of the play a comedy instead of a melodrama. Secondly, Miller has maintained, perhaps even increased the importance of the stage setting at the beginning of the play. In significant detail he describes the Simon family home and emphasizes that the furniture is "vintage 1929, old but in good taste." He adds that these furnishings were "probably expensive" and that there are "too many of them."

By identifying the amount and era of the furniture, Miller is again setting the context for the primary dramatic event of the play; namely, the transformation of the ideas and values of Abe Simon. Miller's stage directions call for furniture and properties that would allow the audience to see that this family lives in the past when they were affluent. This former wealth defines both their identity and the difficulty that they are having coping with the new economic reality. It also makes a visual statement that the family is waiting for and absolutely expects a return to these former times. Miller has taken great care in giving the audience a constant reminder that for these people time has stopped and that the Depression has intruded on every area of their lives. As if to deny the very existence of bad times, Esther Simon has refused to part with her old furniture and fills the house with everything she can find from their former affluent days. The battle between the past and the present thus begins from the first entrance of a character on the stage.

It is very interesting that Miller has made this play a comedy. What he has actually done is change the primary dramatic focus from the survival of the business to the fate of the romantic interests of Ben and Arnold. These love interests are played out in the context of the family business failing, but the real dramatic emphasis is on whether the boys will get the right girl or succumb to the manipulation of money and sacrifice their happiness to save the business. The lighter tone of the play is also evident in the title. The transition from *No Villain* to the *Grass Still Grows* suggests a feeling that the family (and perhaps the country as well) has gone through a nightmare and that indeed the sun still shines and the grass still grows. The title is an

accurate reflection of the much lower sense of desperation that the family feels than in the first version of the Abe Simon story. "I can't understand you, Abe," Esther says early in the play, "something terrible is going on here and everybody's laughing." That statement best summarizes the direction this play has taken away from its original conception. The desperate situation faced by the family in *No Villain* is simply not the same in this play. Was this change due to Miller's trying to make the play more commercially successful? Or was it a subtle change reflecting an evolution in Miller's social and political outlook?

A partial answer to these questions is to be found in the changes in the national mood between the writing of *They Too Arise* in 1937 and *The Grass Still Grows* in 1939. The period of radicalism had passed and the keen awareness of class divisions in the nation had eased somewhat. By 1939, the New Deal as a source of innovative action was finished. Historian Barry Karl points out that Congress, which in 1938 shifted to stronger control by Republicans and Southern Democrats and was moving away from support for the New Deal, was in open rebellion against the WPA that had become the popular symbol of New Deal (and Popular Front) radicalism. Roosevelt's actions were perceived as a challenge to free enterprise and the New Deal fell victim to a new wave of conservatism in the country. Karl argues that a popular suspicion began to arise that government agencies and labor organizations were filled with radicals. This coincided with the dual fear of communism and fascism abroad to inspire a growing anxiety about anything "un-American." ⁸ Robert McElvaine suggests that the sense prevailed that the crisis was over and that the American people had grown tired of the

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New Deal and the left. ⁹ In any event, the move in *The Grass Still Grows* away from the political militancy and sense of crisis found in *They Too Arise* seems to mirror the changes in the social and political environment in late 1930's America.

From a purely artistic standpoint, this is the most technically proficient of anything Miller wrote prior to *All My Sons*. By 1939, he had grown substantially in his ability to develop character and dialogue. For the first time, all the major characters in this play have been fully developed, in that they have their own distinct personality and inner life, and provide excellent opportunities for actors who might play them. The play opens with the same basic situation of Abe and Esther waiting for the arrival of Arnold back home. But this time, Arnold is coming home from Baltimore having just finished medical school at Johns Hopkins. Gone is the impoverished "radical" student who hitchhikes home from Michigan. Esther is worried that Ben is spending too much time with Louise, a girl who Abe employs at the coat factory. She wants him to court Helen Roth, the daughter of the wealthy coat manufacturer who closely resembles the same character from the earlier versions.

This attempt to marry Ben to Helen Roth is the spine of the plot and constitutes the organizing principle for all the other action in the play. Both because the business needs capital and she yearns for her former station in life, Esther invites Sam Roth over to dinner and encourages him to bring his daughter. Knowing that Ben won't like Esther's meddling, Abe says, "if Ben smells a rat he's gonna shoot off fireworks." Aware that Roth wants a son-in-law to run the business, Esther says,

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“Sam Roth, rich as he is, doesn’t forget his friends, and you don’t appreciate it.”

“Sam Roth has no friends,” Abe retorts. It doesn’t concern Esther that Roth has made his millions by cutthroat business tactics and scab labor, all she knows is that other women are still wearing fur and she is not.

The entire play progresses from the efforts of Sam Roth and Esther Simon to find a way to get Ben and Helen married. Will Abe’s desire to give Esther what she once had be enough to marry his son to someone he doesn’t love? Will the despair of watching his business collapse be strong enough to force Abe to do Roth’s bidding? Will Ben decide to martyr himself in an act of loyalty to the family? Will Abe be able to see that the world won’t end if he loses his business? Or will it be, as befits a romantic comedy with serious undertones that some minor miracle happens to save the day? Will Arnold Simon use his brains to rescue Ben and save the family? Miller answers these questions by combining an undisguised romantic ending with some remnants of the political overtones of the first two versions of the play.

There is little to be gained from a detailed investigation of the plot, since it so closely resembles *No Villain* and *They Too Arise*. What will prove valuable is looking at the changes that occur in the Abe Simon character during the course of the play. As was the case in *They Too Arise*, Abe Simon’s transformation is the key dramatic event in *The Grass Still Grows*. In this play however, Abe Simon has more choices than his earlier incarnation. The most obvious way out of his dilemma is to encourage Ben to marry Helen Roth and let Sam Roth give or loan Abe whatever money he needs to

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bring his business back to good health. The Sam Roth character has been greatly enhanced in this play to become someone whom Esther nearly worships and for whom Abe has deeply ambivalent feelings.

The fact that Sam Roth has a daughter who is interested in his son presents Abe with a difficult set of choices. As a “man of business” Abe admires Roth’s success and knows that the business world “is beasts and you gotta be tough and push your way in.” Sam Roth has prevailed in a “dog eat dog world” and Esther continually harps on Abe that this quality is sorely missing from his personality. Miller has drawn the Roth character more sharply because he represents the “old thinking” deeply embedded in Abe that will eventually be discarded. Roth is a personification of attitudes and values that Abe is struggling to move beyond. As members of the audience, we are waiting for Abe to finally see the kind of man Roth is and reject the kind of behavior he has employed to acquire his wealth.

Miller makes the implication that the values harbored by the Sam Roth’s of this world have resulted in the American crisis that is swallowing the Simon family. Sam Roth stands for greed, self-interest at the expense of everyone else and especially the way that traditional business practices and criminal activity are closely related. For Miller, Esther’s worship of Sam Roth is emblematic of the American propensity to glorify material accomplishment and assign to the rich qualities of strength and superior worth. This is why it is so important for Abe to reject Roth’s intimidation because in that effort he is freeing himself from the false values that are making his own life

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miserable. Roth is not just a rich man with an eligible daughter, but rather is a large voice in Abe's head that is urging him to pursue the business ethic where "money talks and people listen."

This ambivalence toward wealth and power is a characteristic that is shared by Abe Simon, Joe and Chris Keller and everyone in the Loman family. The major characters in these plays all are struggling to determine their sense of self-worth and are torn apart by competing forces within their own psyche. Happy Loman hates the falseness of the business world but desperately wants the prestige that his boss has when "fifty-two thousand dollars comes walking through that door." Biff Loman is happy working on a ranch until something in his head tells him that he is not a success because after all, "what am I doing out there playing around with horses twenty-eight dollars a week." Chris Keller is unable to harmonize the sense of a larger responsibility to other people with the pleasure he has in "opening the bank-book, driving the new car and seeing the new refrigerator." Joe Keller's fateful decision takes place when he chooses his own financial well being over any other consideration. From his very first play, Arthur Miller concerned himself with this ambivalence and became far more interested in the manner in which the characters defined themselves than in the expression of a political view.

No Villain and *They Too Arise* present a different problem for Abe Simon than *The Grass Still Grows*. In the first two plays, the question is will Abe break the union to save his business. In the later play, the question is will Abe give in to wealth and

power to save his business. In this way, Abe has gone from the exploiter to the exploited and becomes a much more sympathetic character. Wealth and power in Miller's plays are always associated with greed and borderline criminality. Uncle Ben the virtual personification of Willy Loman's dreams for himself is a man who "walked into the jungle when [he] was sixteen and came out at twenty-one and was rich." But later in the play we see the cold ruthlessness and contempt for others that accounted for his "success." Joe Keller's prosperity is the result of fraud, lying and betrayal of his business partner. Similarly, Sam Roth has risen to the top of the heap by using non-union labor and enforcing it with gangsters and bribes.

"Why is Roth standing and I'm sitting?" Abe asks Esther, "because I gotta pay union wages on my stuff, but Sam Roth he uses gangsters to protect an open shop..it never bothered him." Telling her that "business is one big billiard game," Abe says that Roth "is big enough to produce most of his stuff outa town where there ain't no union." Miller has clearly given Abe a choice to decide between what he knows to be wrong (Roth) and what he senses is right but greatly fears. Complicating Abe's decision is the same thing that makes this choice so difficult for Joe Keller and Willy Loman. Like these two men, Abe has dreamed of giving his business to his sons. His entire life has been spent in building something for his children, and Abe cannot fathom the possibility of watching it all destroyed. What meaning has his life had if he has nothing to give his son? Isn't it more important to make a pact with the devil than condemn one's own life to meaninglessness? In one of the most beautiful

speeches in any Miller play, Abe pours out his heart to Ben about the meaning of his life.

It's all right, Ben. I understand that you don't want the business. You never built. How could you want it? But whatever you are, if you ain't a cloak man, you're still my son, Ben,...and as my son I'd like you to take this from me that I made. It ain't very much, I'll admit, but I'm in it like I'm in you, and I don't want to see it die, like I don't want to see you die. If it's worth twenty-five cents Ben, I gotta give it to you, because that's the only reason why it's here. If it's got to be taken apart, then you do it, because I can't. It's.. these walls, Ben and that chair.. and that coat hanger, too. Whatever they are, that's what I am; whatever they'll become, that's what I'll become too. It's sounds like a kid Ben. I know that. It's a language that they don't speak anymore in this country. But it's the only one I ever learned. Try Ben, try to belong. Or at least help me hold on to it. Make believe.. it's only for me."

This deep desire to find meaning in life by passing something from father to son is a common theme in Miller's early works. For Abe Simon, Joe Keller and Willy Loman, this essentially spiritual yearning takes the material form of the family business or (in Willy's case) the values associated with the building of a business. Comparing these speeches of Joe Keller and Willy Loman to Abe's speech noted above will demonstrate this link.

In trying to explain to his son, Chris, how he possibly could justify sending out defective airplane parts, Joe Keller gives his own version of the "Abe Simon speech."

You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked you're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work, you're out of business; you don't know how to

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operate, you're stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell is it to them? You lay forty years into a business, they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away? .. Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I did it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old, you don't get another chance, do ya?" 10

Willy Loman does not have a business to pass on to his sons, but he has something to give his sons that is just as meaningful to him as Abe's coat business or Joe Keller's company. Willy wants desperately to "teach his boys the right things" His brother Ben tells him that "when I walked into the jungle, I was sixteen and when I walked out I was twenty-one.. and by God, I was rich! "Was rich!! that's just the spirit I want to imbue them with," Willy says, "to walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right!" To give his sons the "secret" is Willy Loman's passion just as much as giving their sons the family business is the passion of Joe Keller and Abe Simon. "It's the wonder of this country," Willy preaches, "that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked." At the end of the play, Willy Loman like Abe and Joe before him is willing to sacrifice his life to give his sons the fruits of his labor.

Miller introduces into the plot of *The Grass Still Grows* an alternative for Abe that is even more difficult for him to accept than closing or giving in to Roth. Max Schneeweiss, the shop foreman in Abe's coat factory approaches his boss with a bold new idea. He proposes that Abe's employees put money into the business to save it from bankruptcy in exchange for a re-incorporation in which the workers will become equal partners in the business. "So, if there are profits, we all share even-Steven," he

tells Abe, “everybody gets a salary.” Unable to fathom himself a manager instead of a boss, Abe at first rejects the idea. “We would be willing to work for a scale low enough to run out the scab shops from the industry,” Max tells Abe, “it wouldn’t pay to cut throats no more, and there won’t be a racketeer left in the industry.”

Ben and Arnold seize upon this idea and attempt to convince Abe that this is the right way to save the business. Abe’s resistance is based on the unsavory idea that he would now be the same as his employees. “I know you think of yourself as the boss,” Ben tells him “but you’re not dad, you’re simply a working man.” Abe roars back at Ben that the world is turning upside down and that he can’t accept such a thing. “What the workers are saying is that you really belong to them,” Ben retorts “but until now you’ve been fighting them instead.” Abe agrees only to think about such a plan because he simply cannot imagine the business not being his anymore. Ben tries to persuade him that this only means that “the business belongs to them too and they hate to leave it as much as you do.”

The seed has now been planted for the eventual transformation of Abe’s moral and political conscience that the final scene of the play unveils. The pressure of the guilt he feels when Ben agrees to marry a woman he doesn’t love finally pushes Abe to his limit and he orders Ben to marry Louise. “I’m proud,” he tells Esther, “because for one of the few times in my life, I saw a man obey himself.” Esther, who like most of the women in Miller’s plays advocates caution and conservative action, tells him that, “they will be poor and very few people in this world can be poor and happy.” When

Abe tells her they will have to take that risk, she replies, “and the business Abe, its down the river?” Abe responds that anything is better than giving in to Roth. “He ain’t a man, he’s a ledger, “ Abe tells Esther, “I got no respect for him.” Alarmed at what she views as Abe’s giving up, Esther calls him “ a regular Communist, getting redder every day.”

Abe’s response to this charge of being a Communist is an excellent indicator of the precise nature of his moral and political transformation. He shrugs off this seemingly alarming accusation because he sees a reflection of his own previous fear of change in Esther’s words. As in the two previous plays, a communist becomes the code word for anyone who objects to the business ethic. For the first time Abe begins to consider the possibility that the joy of life is something that exists outside of his coat factory and that he has postponed living his life for the sake of building his business. “I’m not a Communist, I’m a damn fool” he laments, “ when is the time when we are going to start to live?” In effect, Abe surrenders to the inevitable loss of his business because he has determined that the business has been a substitute for his own definition of what it means to live his life. “The grass still grows and the trees are still there and there’s still enough sun for us to look at,” he says to Esther, “let’s walk with the time instead of trying to stand on it.” Abe closes the play by saying that “there’s new ways to live, young ways and we gotta learn them.”

The end of the play also finds Abe finally accepting the offer of Max Schneeweiss and taking on the workers as partners in the business. “Well, I wish you luck,

workingman” Roth says to Abe who proudly responds, “ I want you to understand that I am not disgraced.” Thus Abe Simon has undergone a transformation that has resulted in him becoming a worker/manager instead of a boss, a man striving for happiness rather than wealth and a father-in-law all in the course of a few days. The last moment of the play has Abe walking a bewildered Esther out the front door fully intending to persuade her to enjoy the remaining days of their lives.

Reading the Abe Simon trilogy should change many preconceptions about the origins and development of the work of Arthur Miller. In my view there is a strong and unbroken line that connects *No Villain* with *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Without doubt Miller’s focus broadened by 1946 and his post-war plays no longer contained direct attacks on the American economic system found in the earlier plays. Yet it remains true that the Joe Keller and Willy Loman stories are embedded in these three plays and virtually every other character introduced in *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* is found in rough form in the Abe Simon plays. As detailed in Chapter One, Miller learned from his family experience what the Depression and the resulting economic crises did to the beliefs that he felt characterized the American mentality prior to 1929. What he concluded from watching his own family’s emotional and economic meltdown is at the core of every play he wrote from 1935-1949. Miller pointed his finger at a belief system, rooted in pre-1929 materialistic values, as the fundamental cause of the problems for the major characters. This deeply held core of values that became the primary antagonist in these plays. The force that constrained the freedom and limited the humanity of Abe Simon, Joe Keller and Willy Loman

was their own conception of themselves and their place in the world, the voices in their heads.

What can we identify then as major themes emerging from these works? To what extent were Miller's politics incorporated into these plays? Does the evolution of *No Villain* into *The Grass Still Grows* reflect changes in Miller's political sensitivities? The central dramatic event in these plays is the transformation within the mind of Abe Simon that causes him to view the world and his own situation completely differently. In my view, this transformation is the closest Miller comes to advocating anything radical. Miller has endowed Abe Simon with many of the same values possessed by the nation and thus an exposure of his personal psyche is in effect a critique of the larger culture in which he lives. Abe's problem is that he clings to beliefs that are outdated and destructive. The Depression has rendered problematic the basic principles that have guided Abe to define himself and establish his worth as a human being. Miller's larger point is that these values are problematic even in the absence of the Depression and that the oppressive economic conditions heightened the inherent tensions and forced awareness on Abe Simon and millions of other Americans like him.

The obvious question is where did these principles come from and why does Abe believe them so strongly? The potentially radical conception here, one that clearly reflects Popular Front thinking, is that Miller is holding American culture responsible for creating a mindset where persons define themselves in destructive ways. Abe and

Esther Simon crave material prosperity and measure themselves against the financial success or failure of other people. Human interactions in these plays are largely reduced to economic relationships. When the Depression destroys their material security and clumps them together in tight confinement, they have no other purpose for living than to wait for a return of former times and continue to hope for “something big” that will save them.

Clearly this problem is not simply confined to the Simon family. Everyone else in these plays suffers from the same delusion. An indictment of this mentality is in effect an attack on the “system” that nurtured such false assumptions. Capitalism is not the direct subject of the plays but the competitive economic system has shaped (or partially shaped) a false structure of desires and attitudes especially among the older generation. Instead of yearning for spiritual fulfillment and thus a more healthy definition of life’s meaning, Abe and Esther can only dream of the big sale, the fur coat or a return to the old days. The system, the plays seem to argue, has created false desires, and thus the goal of life becomes the attainment of wealth, status, respectability, rooted in material things.

In the experiences of his own family, Miller surely observed the ways in which the **D**epression undercut the basic operating premise of American capitalism. Many **c**ritics mention in passing that Miller’s sensibilities were forged during the **D**epression. More than shape his sensibilities, I would argue the economic disaster **o**pened Miller’s eyes to an American problem that actually had little to do with the

Depression. The decade of the 1930's, however, exposed for Miller and many other of the Popular Front the deeply conflicted nature of the prevailing mythology of American culture. The Depression made it extraordinarily difficult for the national mythology to function and provided this insightful young man with an opportunity to use theatre to expose this dilemma.

Abe and Esther Simon are the virtual embodiment of these American myths and thus it is no surprise that they are as conflicted as the myths themselves. This same situation exists in the Keller and Loman families where the characters have internalized these same social values and suffer because of that fact. Abe Simon comes to see that what he thought were indisputable truths about life are instead the products of "old thinking." Abe cannot distinguish between personal and social values, he simply knows what is right and what is wrong. It takes the entire course of the play to enlarge his vision enough to see that he has to begin to see things from a much different perspective.

Miller uses the family business as a metaphor suggesting that the values and attitudes associated with business are the very same practiced in American society. It is not just Abe and Esther Simon who worship wealth and teach their children that rich people are smarter and more respected. Abe Simon did not invent the platitude that it is a "dog eat dog world" and that "business is business." The maxim that teaches us a person is responsible for his own success or failure was not created at the Simon Coat Company. Abe's unquestioned assumption that happiness meant prosperity and that

the good life meant material success was not alien to the vast majority of his fellow countrymen. The English critic, Christopher Bigsby described Miller's early plays in this way:

Miller began his career as a writer at a moment of social, ethical and private dislocation. The Depression placed American myths no less than American realities under pressure. And, placed under pressure, human relationships fractured. Value became price: pragmatism displaced principle. And, lacking any sustainable version of individual integrity, society became little more than systematized injustice, an enabling mechanism that validated self-interest and simple materialism. In other words, Miller wrote about the process whereby an organic community collapses into a soulless society.¹¹

The indictment of society as one in which human relationships and personal aspirations are subordinate to economics brands Arthur Miller as a radical in the manner argued in the previous chapter. The bold assertion that the despair and moral uncertainty of Americans are the direct result of their belief in false values can hardly be seen as anything short of a denunciation of his own culture. The call to reject these beliefs and "find new ways to live" indicates that Miller is using his art to inspire Americans to fundamentally change the present reality. Yet, Miller never offers a model for the transformation for which his plays seem to call. The vague nature of the kind of transformation that Miller envisions, is actually Popular Front radicalism, and this can be seen by examining the kind of action called for in the Abe Simon plays.

Despite Miller's admission in later life that he thought of himself as a Marxist during this period, it is very difficult to support the idea that a social transformation based on

Communist principles is being advocated in these plays. The occasional statements by Ben and Arnold to Abe that he should identify himself more closely with the workers is not a call to any revolutionary action. Abe's growing distaste for Roth and the criminal activities associated with his business does not lead to a renunciation of the entire system or any philosophical conclusions about the society as a whole. At the end of *The Grass Still Grows*, the only event even remotely reformist is the acceptance by Abe of a business partnership with his workers. This 1930's version of an employee owned business is the single and only concrete action taken by any of the characters to oppose the economic system. The only social fact that resulted from the transformation of Abe Simon is an economic accommodation with his workers and the realization that he can no longer call himself a boss or call all the shots.

Miller was Marxist in spirit in these years, as he has articulated in *Timebends*, and this is evident in his general denunciation of materialism and competitive capitalism in these plays. The major problems experienced by the Simon family were the direct result of the economic system. Because they defined themselves and happiness in material terms, Esther and Abe were unable to function as happy, productive human beings once the business began to fail. For Abe, Esther, Roth and others, the Depression exposed how narrow and inhuman were their moral foundations. Since economic success was the unquestioned preoccupation of their lives, these people were willing to undertake the most unprincipled behavior in order to prevent "failure."

So, criminal activity to support the business, the bartering of a daughter for economic gain, the trampling of workers rights were all examples of how private and personal morality suffered or collapsed because of the economic system. Abe Simon and others were unable even to conceive of themselves outside of the economic status quo. Abe and Esther Simon had little capacity or imagination to grasp the meaning of the crises that threatened their business nor the ability to put into social perspective the implications of these events. This provided the younger generation (i.e. Arnold and Ben) the opportunity to attack their "old way of thinking."

That Miller has Esther and Abe assault these ideas as "red" and "communist" cannot hide the fact that the boys are more strongly opposed to the way their parents think than they are in possession of any specific ideas themselves. Miller, through his characters, seems to be suggesting that if Abe (and people of his mentality) can rid himself of his devotion to the values of competitive culture, then the potential for transformational social change exists. The new relationship with his workers took place only after Abe underwent a personal transformation of his attitudes and values. Clearly then, Miller is focused primarily on the world of consciousness.

Miller seems to have determined that economic change was not in itself the solution to the crises of economic disaster. Rather, personal transformation would result in changes that sprang from a new outlook and that art could be an agent of that transformation. Seen in this way, the Depression was valuable because it was a potential agent of consciousness, which might make people aware that new values

were necessary. Because the Depression, for Miller, exposed the nature of his family's values and social interactions, it allowed him to generalize these impressions into an epistemology of our social values. In effect, these plays argue that if we change ourselves we can change the world. If Abe Simon becomes aware that he is a pawn in the economic process, he can then act to change that process by changing first.

Miller is really advocating a moral revolution that will result in a re-composition of social relationships and interpersonal behavior. What Bigsby calls a "moral capitalism" ¹² seems to be the only specific solution to Miller's indictment of what Abe finally realizes is, "this way we got of eating each other." If any kind of redistribution of wealth or rearrangement of economic power were going to take place in the country, it would only happen after an enlightenment of individuals such as Abe Simon. This is why the real event in the Abe Simon plays is the personal transformation, the stunning awareness of himself and the world that changed his whole concept of his life and career. What resulted from this transformation was less important to Miller than the transformation itself. According to Bigsby, Miller, "looked back at his early plays, (characterizing) his belief at the time as a conviction, that awareness rather than judgement was at the end of his work."¹³ If there were a radical component to Arthur Miller's early work, it had less to do with class or socioeconomic dogma, and more with the minds and hearts of Americans.

The essentially positive and idealistic faith in the possibility of personal transformation and moral choice is a sign of what I have called Popular Front radicalism. Through the words of Ben and Arnold, Miller called for justice, equality and even a mild sort of cross-class solidarity with the workers employed by The Simon Coat Company. The change in Abe Simon that allowed him to accept these things came not from ideological dogma or even intellectual persuasion by his sons. The transformation was the result of intuitive, subconscious forces that prompted Abe to finally act on the injustice he observed. Abe Simon's "better" instincts were liberated in these plays. This deep sense of decency and justice was expressed by Abe in the end of *They Too Arise* when he said "I'm gonna see our boys don't waste their lives like I did, trying to get rich." Basically good and decent people like Abe Simon had been distorted by the economic system and the triumphant redemption of their humanity, such is the particular story told in these plays.

The temptation is to see these plays as "apprentice" works filled with the passions of the Depression decade. What is striking, however, is the extent to which this moral transformation became in retrospect the central event in *All My Sons* and, I would argue, *Death of A Salesman*. As I will detail later, the central question asked by Joe and Chris Keller and Willy and Biff Loman is already embedded in these plays of the 1930's. Indeed, Miller himself has said that his plays ask the single question, what is the right way to live in the world? This question is more philosophical and broader in scope than found in the Simon plays, but the animating impulse to explore such issues began not in 1936, but 1946.

ENDNOTES

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3. Ibid, pp 22-23
4. Robert A. Martin, "The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller," 1979, New York: Viking Press, pp 182-85
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CHAPTER FOUR

**WORKERS, RADICALS, AND
FASCISTS:**

THREE OTHER PRE-WAR PLAYS

Because the Abe Simon trilogy was so autobiographical in nature and progressed through three versions covering the entire span of Miller's college years; it remains the best measure of his intellectual preoccupations during the years 1935-1940. Yet, in this period Miller also produced three other plays that reveal much about the young artist as he struggled to perfect his craft and express the ideas and feelings that absorbed his attention. The first two of these plays, *Honors at Dawn* and *The Great Disobedience* are stories of moral transformation in the manner dramatized in the Abe Simon trilogy. The final play, *The Golden Years*, illustrates Miller's broadening political perspective by expanding his social and political critique to the relationship between the competitive system and fascism.

Honors at Dawn, written in 1937, concerns the struggles of factory worker Max Zibriski who gradually learns that his personal problems are connected to those of many others. Miller's experiences working in the Jackson State Prison in Michigan in 1937 formed the raw material for his 1938 play, *The Great Disobedience*. The most interesting and mature of the three works is his 1940 play called, *The Golden Years*. This final pre-war play concerns the conquest of Mexico and the relationship between Cortes and Montezuma. This play serves as an interesting transition from Miller's preoccupations with the issues of the 1930's to the growing threat of war and the relentless march of fascism.

Honors at Dawn, is set in a factory town near a big city. Since Miller was at the University of Michigan, only 50 miles from Detroit and about the same distance from

Flint when he wrote this play, it is clear that he was drawing inspiration from the series of automotive factories in Flint, Saginaw and Ypsilanti. In *Timebends*, Miller recounts his visit to the site of the sit-down strikes at the General Motors Fischer Body Plant in Flint, on New Year's Day, 1937.¹ As the play opens, several men are preparing for a general strike of the Castle Parts plant by distributing leaflets encouraging participation by all the workers. The atmosphere is very tense as the men try to find a way to get flyers to every area of the plant and yet avoid the management thugs who have been hired to disrupt plans for making the strike.

The men decide to enlist the help of twenty-three year old Max Zibriski because he knows the plant and he won't talk if he is caught. Max is a strongly independent but generally apolitical man who is chosen not for his union sympathies but for his toughness and also because he has no family and has less to lose if he is fired. Miller spends a good deal of time early in the play creating the atmosphere of tremendous tension in the plant. The courage necessary to carry out a strike is underscored by conversations between the workers in which the fear of losing their jobs eats away at the desire to stand up to injustice. "I can't lose this job," one worker declares, "if I lose this one I'm out for life, I get blacklisted; I got people.."

In establishing the environment inside the plant on the verge of the strike, Miller dramatizes the obstacles to empowerment faced by the working people similar to the manner employed in *No Villain*. These same obstacles created the primary conflict for Clifford Odet's plots in *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* The word,

“empowerment” is more accurate in this case than radical because in all of these plays, the end result is a strike against management and not any revolutionary acts against the state. There are clear parallels between Max Zibriski and Joe Mitchell in *Waiting for Lefty*. The dramatic action is essentially the same in both plays in that the real “event” in both dramas is a fundamental change in outlook by each character. Miller creates Max Zibriski (as Odets does Joe Mitchell) as a form of American “Everyman” who brings a basic suspicion of labor movements and a deep reluctance to see his problems as the fault of anyone or anything outside himself. The play then becomes the story of how Max gains awareness of the source of his personal frustrations and how this new perspective causes him to act and attain “honors at dawn.” The implication is that America needs a similar transformation, a shift from “individualism” to a more social outlook.

Despite the presence of management spies and the fear that many of the workers feel “it is un-American to sit-down,” Max agrees to distribute the flyers throughout the plant. At the same time, top management is meeting to devise a scheme of raising the wages to prevent a strike and increasing the amount of money given to informers and thugs. The owner of the plant, Mr. Castle has committed himself to ensuring that “there is not a union man or communist left in the plant.” When asked how the middle managers are supposed to know which of 60,000 workers is a “Red,” Castle replies that “all you need is a hundred inspectors and the men would think every other worker was a spy.”

With this strategy as an inspiration, the managers set out to short-circuit the strike by planting “inspectors” throughout the plant. This coincides with Max being observed passing out the literature, and Gunliffe, the plant manager hauls him into the office for interrogation. First, Gunliffe tries to bribe Max into becoming an informer, then he begins to threaten him, saying, “You’ll never work in another plant in this country, understand?” “Get yourself another rat,” Max tells Gunliffe, “I work for a living.” The scene ends with Max being beaten by security men. “Next time you get within a block of this plant ya get a belly full a bullets, ya goddam Red bastard,” Gunliffe screams as the curtain falls.

So, at the end of the first act, Miller has established the antithetical forces that will clash throughout the play. Max Zibriski is the archetypal “strong, silent, self-reliant American” who has no sense of “working –class solidarity.” Set against him is wealthy Mr. Castle, whose identity as a man of social respectability hides a cynical, scheming mentality that is determined to crush any effort to reform his business practices. Castle speaks of unions and reds in the same breath, and his power to rid the plant of them depends on the willingness of middle managers to carry out his “dirty-work.” By the end of the first act, Miller has set two contrasting social attitudes against each other, and basically everyone in the play will come down on one side or the other.

The next portion of the play shifts to the family farm to which Max has retreated in the hope of finding a new direction for his life. The only real significance in this

section is the introduction of two characters that exemplify the polarization of attitudes noted previously. On one hand is Max's brother, Harry, an engineering major at the university. The other character is Smygli, a stout, healthy farmer and exile from Poland. Harry, who in many ways resembles Hap Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, is a personification of the attitudes held by Castle and other men of "business." Smygli, like the grandfather, Jacob, in Odet's *Awake and Sing!*, or in Miller's *No Villain* and *They Too Arise*, is the guardian of culture whose ire is raised by the false values of materialism.

Harry Zibriski is a technocrat, an engineer and confirmed capitalist whose greatest sin is possessing no life philosophy beyond the practical. The pure, pragmatic almost soulless individual is one who is found in later Miller plays where the spiritual side is missing or subordinated to self-interest and the demands of American economic priorities. Harry tries to persuade Max to enter the university and pursue engineering that could result in financial success. Smygli argues that all this will do is turn Max into a capitalist and deprive him of any sense of culture. In a virtual duplication of a scene from *Awake and Sing*, Harry and Smygli argue over the definition of culture.

Smygli: What do you know [Harry] besides engineering? Nothing. Did you ever read Spinoza? Did you look at a poem since you was in grade school? The nearest thing to a philosophy you got is that a piston should fit to one-thousandth of an inch.

Harry: Sure, [culture] is all right. But who's got it? Only the rich people. First, I'm getting the money, then I get the culture.

Smygli: You'll *get* culture. You know what your culture will be? A sixteen cylinder car. A big house. Ah, Harry, a man can't live without a great hope. Something you can't get easy.

Harry: So, what you got now? What good did your culture do you, heh? What you got?

The importance of this dialogue is not only that it imitates Odets, but also that it expresses a genuine social anger in Miller. Smygli is arguing about the value of college not as a pragmatic means to an end but as a place to learn a philosophy of life. "Learn what makes your blood run," he says to Max "live simply, then you will be happy." Harry urges Max to seek engineering because that is where "the dough is." Harry expresses contempt for working people and the ideas of intellectuals when he says to Max, " You're a sucker to work with your hands, if you've got a head on your shoulders." Confused, Max decided to go to college because he believes that somehow he will find a chance to be happy there. " Imagine the way it will be," he says to his mother, "a strong guy gets up in the morning and lives."

Writing fifty years later in *Timebends*, Miller says of this period in his life that he had a "conviction that art ought to be of use in changing society." "This was, of course, a common idea in the thirties," Miller writes, " in part because it was so simple to understand."² Perhaps this simplicity explains the rather obvious nature of Miller's plot as the play progresses. The transformation of Max continues as the play shifts to the university where Max enrolls and takes up residence in his brother's room. The scenes at the university are full of purely functional characters who serve

to reinforce the idea that Max cannot escape social reality by retreating into college. Instead Max finds that the forces corrupting society are also at work to poison academia as well.

The university power structure is pictured as serving the desires of the rich. Decent, honest students of no means are refused loans and have no alternative but to leave school. People like Harry however use devious means to ally themselves with “the right people” to obtain loans. The greater malignancy is the control that big business exerts over the policies of the university. Just as he did in the Abe Simon trilogy, with characters like Sam Roth, Miller dramatizes the power of wealth to corrupt the values of individuals and of entire institutions.

In *Honors at Dawn*, this takes the form of Mr. Castle donating a huge amount of money to the university and then using this gift to coerce the institution into doing his bidding. If Castle’s precise instructions on the construction of the buildings are not followed, then the money will be withdrawn. As was the case with Hitler, Castle demands Gothic buildings. More ominous however, is Castle’s order to rid the University of “liberal professors who are engaging in “anti-government teaching.” Castle demands that the university president get rid of a “few maladjusted men who have a grudge against anyone more prosperous than themselves.” He demands to know why he should pay for the education of people who are “trained to be union sympathizers and in fact, Communists.” Castle says that he feels that anyone who strikes against him “is an enemy of our government.” He closes the scene by

demanding that the University infiltrate “Red” organizations and “keep these people out of school.”

Although this early work has rather little merit as a play, it is provocative in its artistic and intellectual intent. Miller has indicted both the business and academic communities as corrupt and working against larger national interests. The conflict in the play mirrors those ideas developed by the Popular Front during the years 1935-1937 in that there exists a struggle between the values of corporations and the power of the wealthy and the common people. This struggle takes concrete form in the play when Castle’s threats force the university administration to do the same thing as the middle managers at the parts plant: namely, “dirty work” for the big-money man.

The president orders the infiltration of student organizations and soon Harry is offered substantial financial aid for both Max and himself in turn for spying on student radicals. Like Hap and Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller creates two brothers with opposite perspectives and allows their personal interaction to serve as a metaphor for the same dynamic in American life. Max, having no awareness of Harry’s bargain, finds himself attracted to the ideas of the very liberal Professor Dickinson. It seems that this man is a union organizer and has written a book “showing up capitalism” for which his job is now in jeopardy. Two friends of Max invite the wife of Dickinson over to the dormitory room to plot strategy aimed at preventing the university from firing the professor.

This impending meeting provides the opportunity for Max to undergo the kind of soul-searching in which most of Miller's leading characters are engaged. As he grows uncomfortable with the eventual need to commit to action, he balks and asks, "What the hell am I doing here [at the university] I'm a man, not a kid." "I sit here and listen to these guys talk about social problems," he says "but if they'd go out and work with the men for two weeks, they'd go home and cry." Max senses that he is a working man and not an intellectual and struggles to see the relevance of one world to the other.

Harry reinforces this by urging Max to "stop worrying about the world and think of yourself a little more." "It's the individual that counts in this world," Harry says "and what doesn't affect you, shouldn't bother you." How often this debate over moral responsibility will resonate through Miller's later plays! But like that of so many other characters in future plays, Harry's morality is simply covering pure self-interest. Harry has taken the financial aid to finance his high living and desire to appear wealthy to impress "important" people. In a device that will also repeat itself in future plays, Harry turns betrayer as he secretly informs the administration on the details of the meeting and ideas spoken by the professor.

At the meeting in the brother's room, Harry's genuine honesty and lack of guile prevent him from believing that Professor Dickinson could be the target of vindictive university actions. Dickinson has written a history of the American labor movement, which provides evidence of the influence of big business in academia and Max's

friends try to make him see why the university would seek revenge for such views. Max, like many other people, is unwilling to believe that anybody in America “could be fired for writing a true book.” When his friends implicate Castle as the source of Dickinson’s problems, Max explodes in a fury of denial and righteous indignation. “You think because one of your Reds lost his job, that you’re gonna get me out there and get it back for him?” Max rages, “ Well, I ain’t listening.” As the act closes, Max sits alone with his doubts and declares that “if it was true, I’d go back and rip that plant like a cyclone.”

The last act of the play is the fulfillment of that promise by Max. His “liberal” friend, Stan begins to eat away at Max’s determination not to return to the Castle plant and take up the fight. Hiding in the university is not going to work, he tells Max, because “you’ve got a battle on your hands that has to be fought.” “You’d better make up your mind because Castle owns you here as well as [he does] in the plants,” he says. The fight is the same everywhere as long as the world’s the same.” Even when Stan produces evidence that Castle is getting an honorary doctorate for donating buildings, Max refuses to admit that he believes that Castle is buying influence. At the end of the scene Stan yells at Max in frustration, “It’s the air of the plant you’re breathing in here.” “You don’t want a school, you want a church,” he declares, “ only they own that too.”

Just as it would later take undeniable proof of guilt before Chris Keller would believe his father’s betrayal in *All My Sons*, it is only when Harry’s treachery is

demonstrated that Max undergoes his “transformation” and the play’s main action is complete. The shock he experienced from his own brother’s betrayal is the vehicle by which Max realizes that there is no escape from social responsibility for a man with any manhood.

The last scene of the play returns to the gates of the Castle parts plant. The strike is underway and the workers begin to lose their nerve when the police enter the plant. The wives of the strikers have brought food, and the authorities are planning to arrest the workers when they attempt to take it inside the plant. Just at the moment the police begin to move, Max climbs up to an elevated microphone and shouts encouragement to the strikers. At first, Max tries to urge a nonviolent resistance, but soon the police draw their weapons and prepare to charge the plant. Max tries to forestall disaster by pleading with the police that the strikers have no weapons. Despite this, a shot rings out and the police charge the strikers. Max then directs the action from the platform and helps the strikers drive the police out of the plant.

As dawn slowly breaks and the police are being pushed out of the plant, Max shouts encouragement from the platform. Telling the workers that it is “their plant” he urges the strikers to drive the police out of town. “If they won’t give us what we want” he screams into the microphone, “we stand up and run the works ourselves.” Max is shot in the shoulder and as he slumps to the ground he declares that he won’t die because “I learned too much to die now.” As the play closes, Max tells the workers,

“It’s gonna be ours, all ours.” Having proclaimed victory, one of the workers tells Max that he has “graduated, with honors.”

Despite the apprentice level of artistry in this play, Miller is dealing with a number of important themes in *Honors at Dawn* that offer insight into the development of his thought. This play was written at about the same time as *They Too Arise*, which is the most politically bold of the Abe Simon plays. Miller is dealing with some genuine anger about what he considered “wrong” with American society, no doubt reflecting his views of the 1937 sit down strike and the organizing drives of the CIO unions.

But what angered him most is what he calls in *Timebends* “the readiness of Americans to blame themselves rather than the system for their downfall.”³ This is why it takes Max the entire play to admit the obvious (at least in the play) that there are no “private problems” that are not also social problems and thus national problems. This is what we are “waiting for” as the plot progresses, we are asking the question, when is Max going to get wise and do something? When Max says, “its gonna be ours” he displays an insight that happens to many other Miller characters as they discover the source of their unhappiness. Abe Simon discovers that “its gotta be wiped out and we gotta do it, Joe Keller realizes that they are *all* his sons, Biff Loman becomes aware that, “I know who I am.” The Miller characters move from innocence to outrage over what Miller calls the “bullshit of capitalism.”⁴ Yet, the

key event is the insight itself that only *implies* future transformation instead of engaging the main character in revolution of some kind.

It is interesting that Miller uses various terms for people on the political left in an almost synonymous manner in these plays, lumping socialists, communists, liberals and reds together in a group all fighting the corrupting interests of wealth and power. This is not surprising in that it places Miller as typical of what R. Alan Lawson said of the Popular Front, that it made no distinction between radical and liberal, instead it defined those on the left as any intellectual seeking left- solutions without resorting to inflexible dogma. ⁵ Miller seems to be generally uninterested in the difference between the ideological positions of these groups because he is focused on the manner in which they are all engaging the larger problem, thus reinforcing the view that Miller is more concerned in his plays with exposing the vacuity of conventional middle class wisdom than advocating a particular political position of his own, though his sympathies are obvious and clear. The conclusion I draw from these plays is that Miller is a radical critic of American capitalism, but he most certainly is not a revolutionary.

Honors At Dawn is a play that can be viewed as possessing a certain radical potential. It suggests that both industry and academia are under the control of very wealthy and powerful people. It advocates for workers rights to organize and strike, and glorifies the employee's takeover of a major industrial plant. It features a character who is idolized by many because he is a communist who "shows up"

capitalism. It ridicules the desire to have money and appear wealthy, and assaults any attitude that expresses contempt for the poor and the workers. Further, it subjects its main character to the terrible consequences of finding fault with the “system.” Because Max is desperately trying to determine right from wrong he is mistrusted and brutalized by the authorities while his cynical and shallow brother benefits from a system that rewards someone who takes names and keeps his mouth shut.

Yet, the real focus of Miller’s radicalism in this play is not his advocacy of workers rights or union of a particular type or his exposure of the links between big money, industry and the academy and advocacy for programs of action. Again, the play offers no real answers except to hire more honest college administrators, develop stronger labor unions and conduct a congressional inquiry into the influence of big business in the universities. These are important developments, but they are reformist. The more subversive aspect of this play, which Miller would develop more fully in *The Golden Years*, is contained in the characterization of Castle.

Mr. Castle is the first Miller character who embodies a truly fascist mentality and several very profound conclusions about Miller’s political thinking can be drawn from examining this individual. Castle justifies his actions because he sees himself as defending traditional Americans values. To Castle, the enemy of “Americanism” is communism, socialism, labor troublemakers of any kind and people who “don’t think right.” What makes Castle a fascist instead of a committed political conservative is that he uses his economic power to stamp out unconventional

thinking and behavior. More ominous is Castle's use of patriotism to justify the infiltration of the labor unions and universities to eliminate those with the wrong opinions. Within three years, Miller would begin to focus more on the threat of fascism in American life than he would working-class solidarity and the support for campus radicals. His next play would also partially concern itself with this fascist impulse when he examined the role of big business in the prison system.

The Great Disobedience is the first play that Arthur Miller ever wrote based entirely on his own research. It came about as the result of several visits to the Jackson (Michigan) State Prison, in 1937 and 1938. A friend of Miller had gotten a job as the lone psychologist in the nation's largest prison and this gave Miller an opportunity to observe and even get to know prisoners of all sorts. "In those depression years," Miller said later, "it did not take much insight to notice that most crimes were preeminently economic, people stealing in order to eat." 6. Miller also came to the conclusion that the prison was "more an asylum for the insane than a place to punish criminals." Miller encountered countless number of stories that a different writer might have crafted into the kind of play or movie that depicts the horrors of prison life in graphic detail. The genre of the "good boy goes bad" and is sent "up the river" where he is brutalized in prison and turns hard and cold or absolutely crazy could have been the subject of Miller's next play.

But Miller had already begun to display the intellectual and artistic propensities that have characterized his plays to the present day. According to Kenneth Rowe, Miller

has actually always been a revealer rather than a reformer in that his dramatic focus has been concerned more with the impact of society on people rather than with that of people on society. ⁷ Miller himself described this play as “the system’s malign pressure on human brains waiting to be exposed.” ⁸ With the firm conviction that his art “ought to be of use in changing society,” Miller wrote a play that attempted to expose the social forces that made “criminals” of some men.

The Great Disobedience is undisguised attack on the power of wealth and big business to manipulate decent individuals into serving their interests. In a manner very similar to the control exercised over the university by pecuniary forces in *Honors At Dawn*, *The Great Disobedience* dramatizes the corrupting influence of powerful businessmen on the prison system. The play is the story of an ambitious and idealistic young psychiatrist, Karl Mannheim, who comes to realize that the prison is simply a tool by which powerful individuals in society exercise control by locking away persons who express dissent and subversive opinion. The prison depicted in Miller’s play is filled primarily with political prisoners and economic victims, both of whom suffer because of the essential injustice of the American economic system.

Karl Mannheim, like Max Zibriski, Ben Simon, Chris Keller, Biff Loman and other Miller characters, experiences a transformation in the way he sees the world as the result of the events in the play. The same basic dramatic formula exists in all of Miller’s plays from 1936-1949 in that the major character or characters is brought to

an awareness of social forces that have limited their freedom and happiness. In this particular instance, Mannheim comes to believe that his life should be used to “show the people of America who their enemies are.” As the events in the play expose the truth that has been covered by the appearance of propriety, Mannheim makes the emotional and intellectual journey from the singular pursuit of self-interest to genuine social commitment and rebellion.

As the play opens, Karl Mannheim is the only psychiatrist at the largest prison in the United States. It is still early in his tenure at the prison, and he pursues his attempt to bring order and discipline to the psychological evaluation of the prisoners. An important part of Mannheim’s job is supposed to be recommending to the warden the best environment for each prisoner. Mannheim interviews the prisoners and gives expert testimony regarding which individuals are dangerous and require solitary confinement. Further, it is Mannheim’s understanding that he is also responsible for determining which prisoners are sufficiently “reformed” to warrant parole. With great enthusiasm and perhaps a little naiveté, Mannheim plunges into his work.

He soon discovers however, that serious impediments exist which prevent his recommendations from being considered. Mannheim learns that his old college friend and fellow psychiatrist, Victor Matthews, is an inmate in the prison and when his wife visits Mannheim she implores him to intercede on her husband’s behalf. By agreeing to look into the matter, Mannheim commits himself to the action that constitutes the essential “story” of this play. In the end, what Mannheim eventually

finds when he investigates the case of Victor Matthews is the reason why Matthews and countless others like him are really in prison.

At first, Mannheim is inclined to view Matthews, as he does every other prisoner, as the product of his own particular personality and specific behaviors that has caused him to run afoul of the law. Slowly, this predisposition begins to crumble as Mannheim digs deeper into the circumstances of Matthew's case. In an early scene from the first act, Deputy Warden McLean and Mannheim have a confrontation over the Doctor's desire to make important reforms. "You want to get married, don't you, get a raise and keep your job?" his deputy asks him. This will only happen if Mannheim "gets wise" and accepts the fact that "they don't want to improve the place, they just want it quiet." But Matthews, like all of Miller's main characters is someone who cannot "walk away from it," and decides to challenge the warden and pursue reform. "A man can be human on this job," Mannheim declares, and he asks to see Victor's record.

Thus, the inciting incident of the play is the moment when Mannheim decides to find out what lies beneath the surface in the affairs of the prison. This allows Miller to introduce the same basic idea that he explored in *Honors at Dawn* namely, that the rights of American citizens are being held hostage by the power of a small number of wealthy individuals and that the average person is completely unaware of this fact. Following the same pattern, this play also will bring awareness to the

protagonist without resulting in any particular action on his part that might be seen as revolutionary.

Ignoring the explicit orders of the warden, Mannheim has Matthews brought to his office for an interview. He is curious as to what Matthews has done to warrant solitary confinement, which is usually reserved for the most dangerous criminals. Matthews discloses that he was imprisoned for committing an abortion on one of the employees of the Riker Industrial Works, where Matthews was the physician. "There's something wrong with this record," Mannheim notices, " why did it take a year before you were arrested?" Matthews is struck by Mannheim's naivete and reminds him that Stephen Riker was his former employer.

When Mannheim fails to grasp the significance of this fact, Matthews puts forward the assertion that will later constitute Mannheim's political awareness. "Stephen Riker is the man who pitched up these walls around me and cast bars in my mouth," he tells his old friend. "Stephen Riker put me in here," he tells Mannheim, "and Stephen Riker ordered me to be put in maximum security." "The biggest racket in the Middle West is going on not fifty miles from here in the largest rubber plant in the country," Matthews declares to a disbelieving Mannheim. It was Matthews' job to find any medical reason to deny desperate workingmen their rights and to help capitalists to populate the prisons with those who agitated against this injustice. "There are enough truck drivers, molders, tenders in this prison to run the greatest plant on earth," Matthews states " and every big manufacturer in the state knows it."

“That’s why I’m a maximum security inmate,” Matthews yells at the end of the scene, “the other reasons are machinations of sick minds.”

If Mannheim could accept this argument, the play would be over but he can only respond in confusion “ I’m a doctor, not a politician.” Mannheim convinces himself that Matthews is partially delusional and rejects the radical political implications of his statements. Swallowing his doubts, he puts Matthews back in solitary confinement. Probably Miller sensed how extraordinarily difficult it would be for his audience to accept the premise that the prisons were mainly the dumping-ground for political enemies of the wealthy class. It made good dramatic sense therefore to place these doubts in the mind of the main character, who then could experience the same emotional and political journey as the average reader or viewer of the play. On Mannheim’s journey to political awareness, he faces the temptation of self- interest and the disinclination to believe conspiracy theories. Surely the playwright must have judged that these same propensities were at least partially responsible for the political inaction of most Americans. In this sense, in keeping with the “radical” message of the Popular Front this play can be seen as a metaphor for a nation imprisoned by its inability to see the truth.

As the play progresses, Mannheim is confronted with more and clearer evidence that the prison is filled with decent people whose lives and dreams are being crushed by the system. Victims either of economic desperation resulting in petty theft or pure political vindictiveness, these people make a powerful impression on Mannheim and

add to his growing doubts. A Yiddish character, Ginsburg has been imprisoned for seven years for writing a “bad” forty –dollar check. Another prisoner, Barrington, was once a writer and apparently his subject matter landed him a jail sentence. Soon the doctor begins to uncover a drug ring operated by the guards. “I’ve got dynamite,” he says to Steve, “ to blow the lid off this place.”

This certainly identifies Mannheim as a person of moral integrity and courage, who is convinced that corruption exists in the prison but has not yet grasped the true origins of the disease. As Act Two begins, Mannheim’s fiancé, Jean, has taken up Matthews’ cause and begins to urge the doctor to reinvestigate Matthews’ claims suggesting that Stephen Riker be contacted in an effort to address the claims made by Matthews. “This is a prison and there are boundaries,” Mannheim angrily replies, “ this doesn’t concern anyone outside these walls.” When Jean resists, Mannheim says, “ Do you think it is possible that I’m working for an industrialist?” “Don’t be a child.” Mannheim declares, “this has nothing to do with politics.” But the main intellectual argument in Miller’s play is that this has everything to do with politics and the reader (and audience member) is left to wonder how blind Mannheim can be not to see the obvious evidence.

Jean becomes the moral compass for Mannheim and as the second act progresses, she begins to try to shame or provoke him into action. Despairing over his anxiety and lack of courage, Mannheim says, “ I’ll train myself to see only what I choose to see.” Jean expresses her contempt for this rationalization by accusing him of

ignoring everything but his own well-being. An argument between the two culminates in the following exchange, which clearly foreshadows both the end of the play and many future encounters in Miller's subsequent plays. Jean appeals to Mannheim's basic sense of right and wrong in an attempt to goad him to action. Mannheim's retort clearly anticipates Chris Keller and Biff Loman.

Mannheim: I've got too many inherited notions in my head about good and bad, right and wrong. A man who works in society can't keep them. They're for rich people who can play with them in resorts and winter beaches. This is the cesspool of civilization. I can't look at it and cry or I'd never see clearly enough to do my work.

Jean: So, you'll close your eyes altogether.

Mannheim: I'll be the same when I'm with you. We could do it. I tell you, Jean!

Jean: Maybe you could, but not me. The smell of decay is in here but it would cling to you as pungently and silently as smoke. I'd never be able to get it out of my nose

Mannheim: I'm past it. I'm going to float on the top from now on. The other way there's no percentage. Wait for me Jean. Things don't run in extremes. I'll find a middle way I'll....

Jean: There is no middle way. You're either for them or against them..unless you want to be like you are now. Karl, this is the middle way, where you're standing now. This is the shifting, tender ground and it won't hold you very long. You'll either hold the hypodermic in your hand, or smash it on the floor. I'm waiting, Karl.

Jean's statement that there "is no middle way" is very significant both in this play and for the major characters in every Miller work. The middle way is a euphemism for an individual who is trapped between the pull of self-interest and the demands of a moral conscience. I find it particularly interesting that Mannheim relegates ethical behavior to "rich people in resorts and winter beaches." Miller had enough of the practical man inside him to realize that "radical" action of any kind can be contrary to happiness and common sense and to live and work in the everyday world calls for compromise. This desire to find a middle way and avoid transformational action is the key element in the personality of Max Zibriski who desperately seeks to find a "middle way" that (despite knowing the truth of the situation at the plant) will allow him to pursue his own life and dreams without the complications of social action. It is also clearly evident in Chris Keller who later tries, unsuccessfully, to harmonize the lessons learned in his wartime experience with the enjoyment of the "bankbook and the new car." It is the central conflict in Willy Loman as he tries, without success, to harmonize his spiritual longings with his devotion to material success.

Escaping from the moral tangle and living for oneself is a major theme in Miller's early plays and is reflected in his later works. One can only speculate that Miller was writing about the difficulty of taking a moral position and thus he identified with Mannheim's desire to have it both ways and somehow save himself from the consequences of what he knows he must do. But the Arthur Miller of 1937-38 still was very clear that beliefs should be transformed into action and thus Mannheim,

like Ben Simon and Max Zibriski before him, resists the temptation of escaping a clear moral choice.

Miller reflects the general outlook of the Popular Front in the late 30's when he makes taking a moral position constitute the extent of radical behavior by the characters in these plays. Dr. Mannheim articulates this when he told Jean that "things don't run in extremes" and that the answer lay in the "middle way." The play will prove this wrong, and Mannheim, like Ben and Max, will undergo a transformation and be "radicalized." But in keeping with the modest radicalism of the Popular Front, Mannheim's eventual transformation will be a spiritual one, and the play will only vaguely suggest that any action might evolve from this new perspective.

Act Two of *The Great Disobedience* culminates in a series of short scenes in which Mannheim tries to conform himself to the status quo and "play ball" with the corrupt authorities at the prison. When finally Mannheim has had enough of his own equivocation, he confronts Mclean and the act ends with a decision by the doctor to fight the corruption and get rid of the evil deputy warden. "I'm big enough to wheel you and this hell house into the biggest public square in America," he shouts to Mclean, "and tear down the fraud with your bones buried under it." This decision to act sets the stage for the final events of the play in Act Three. Mannheim realizes now that he must do something to address the injustice at the prison. What

he will learn in the last act is the extent to which the prison is just one example of a systemic injustice in American society.

As Act Three opens, Mannheim's evidence of drug running at the prison has hit the papers, and the prison commission is meeting. The big question is whether Mclean's friends on the commission will allow him to escape punishment.

Meanwhile, the doctor has become something of a folk hero in the region as the news of the scandal hits the newspapers. George Feder, the secretary of the International Rubber Union gives a talk entitled, " Dr. Mannheim and the working man." A puzzled Mannheim wonders ironically, "What have I got to do with the working man?"

This question begins to be answered when both Stephen Riker and Senator Rolphe pay Mannheim a visit. Through the course of the scene it becomes obvious that Mannheim has alarmed Riker and Rolphe by suggesting that a connection exists between poverty, unpopular political beliefs and incarceration. In an effort to squash this dangerous conviction, Riker and Rolphe appeal to Mannheim's self-interest by offering to build him a first-class mental health clinic in the prison.

This event illustrates a common theme in Miller's plays. The main character is often sorely tempted to act in his own interests and turn his back on the larger moral issue facing him. In this case, Mannheim has achieved his life's dream namely, the creation of a first-rate psychiatric clinic that will insure his professional reputation.

Yet, this clinic will concern itself only with the symptoms of the problem that lies in the corrupt social system that sends desperate men to prison to stifle their dissent. Although Mannheim is aware of this at some level, he is unable to act socially as Miller describes it and rejoices in his good fortune.

The rejoicing is short-lived as soon new Deputy Warden Tyler arrives to replace Mclean. Mannheim's pleasure in learning that Mclean has been replaced is quickly doused by Tyler's admission that he is a good friend of Mclean and that he also shares McLean's admiration for Huey Long. "In the South we believe that man is inside because he is no good and that's why they take punishment." He berates Mannheim "we look at the whole thing from the point of view of society." Mannheim is now forced to realize that the prison commission may have changed the warden, but they have left the system unchanged.

The light bulb now goes off in Mannheim's head, and he undergoes the epiphany that leads the play to its conclusion. He calls himself a "little boy" whose innocent trust has died and a man who "has stayed much too young, much too long." He declares to Jean that the "little boy is dead" and that a new anger is rising in him that "I never knew before in my life." "There's a new hate that's going to burn somebody" he proclaims to Jean.

That somebody turns out to be the industrialist Riker who comes to visit Mannheim to insure that the doctor will not be causing any more trouble. Riker tries to prove to

Mannheim that the prison has been cleaned up while at the same time warning him against dangerous ideas. Sounding a bit like Sam Roth in *The Grass Still Grows*, Riker conveys his version of the American creed when he tells Mannheim, “A man’s duty is to go out and get what he wants.” “An idea like that made this country,” he tells Mannheim prophetically, “and a man has no right to neglect an opportunity.” Riker then creates such an opportunity by offering Mannheim the lucrative job of being chief psychiatrist for all Riker Industries. “You’ll go a long way, doc, and I can make it worth your while,” Riker tells him, “but you must remember your responsibility.”

Riker defines that responsibility as the good sense not to carry “private affairs into the public press, but [instead] coming to the authorities first.” “I swear that if it means my life,” Mannheim tells her, “I ‘m going to put Stephen Riker where he belongs.” He discovers the best way to destroy Riker when he examines a recently arrived prisoner who has been sentenced to jail for forging a check. When the doctor asks why the man was sent to the state penitentiary for such a small offense, the man tells him that the real reason for his detention is that he staged a technicians strike at Universal Chemicals Corporation. Mannheim clearly sees the pattern of retribution repeating itself and tells his fellow psychiatrist that, “we’re at the wrong end of the machine.” Obviously, the key realization for Mannheim is that a *machine* is in place and that machine is working contrary to the interests of decent people.

“This time we’ll show the people of America why their sons are winding up in here,” Mannheim tells Jean, “this time we’ll show them who their enemies are.” Here again is a very important aspect of Miller’s early writing. In keeping with the spirit of Popular Front radicalism, he makes a very clear attempt in the course of these plays to identify the enemy. In the Abe Simon plays, the enemy is a system of false and outdated values that causes otherwise good people to behave in immoral and unethical ways. In *Honors at Dawn* and *The Great Disobedience* the enemy is the power of wealth to manipulate social institutions and the stubborn naiveté of average Americans who shower respect on the people who most deserve their contempt. For Karl Mannheim, this realization has only come about after great personal pain and loss. “ You laugh at a woman,” Jean tells him, “but men too learn great things only through the heart.”

The play ends with Mannheim’s deciding to quit the prison and go to work for Riker. Once he is working on the inside, he can gather enough evidence to expose Riker and prove that he is but one example of the bigger problem. “We’ve got the wrong name for diseases in America,” he tells Jean, “they don’t indicate the cause.” This is indeed evidence of Mannheim’s “radicalized “ perspective. He has moved from comfortably within the system and doubtful or unaware of any pathology in American society to a rebel committed to subverting the present reality. Mannheim’s rebellion will consist of making a great disobedience refusing to quietly go along with the way things are presently constituted. Comparing his new insight with Christ’s ideas, Mannheim says his discovery “belongs not to a man, but

to mankind.” “Long ago it was nailed to a cross, but it never died,” he tells Jean, “its conception lies in the constant struggle of men with masters of men.”

The Great Disobedience is a play that shares many of the same themes as other Miller plays in the period 1935-1940. In interesting ways, it also anticipates the preoccupations of his work from 1946-1953. The signature Miller trait of writing a play in which the surface appearance of things is gradually exposed to reveal the corrupt foundation beneath is very evident. The prison is a metaphor for American society in which ordinary individuals are trapped in a system in which their freedoms are subject to the control of capital and industry. The character of Stephen Riker serves this thematic function in that his power to dictate the sentencing of his employees to prison argues that the penal system is a weapon of control for big business. The inside of the prison is itself generally representative of the world outside in that the people who have the power (the warden and his masters) supply the things (i.e. drugs) that satisfy the needs that they have created in the prisoners. Thus Miller’s play is an attempt to expose what is hidden beneath the surface and in this way anticipates *All My Sons* and *The Crucible*.

In what way then can this play be interpreted as radical? The answer lies in the specific nature of Mannheim’s transformation. By the end of the play, the doctor has been shocked into the realization that the prison is only one piece of the big picture and that he needs to fulfill his destiny as someone who will join the “struggle of men with masters of men.” But, his new radicalism is Popular Front in nature namely,

radical words but not revolution. Once he determines that Stephen Riker is the problem and the prison corruption only the symptoms, he devotes himself to exposing Riker, getting the “big fish.” The great disobedience is the determination not to cooperate with the forces that conspire to protect profits and maintain control. The “radical” action to be taken is to bring to justice evil men like Riker who are corrupting America’s institutions. Nowhere in this play is there any suggestion that the great disobedience ought to be the fundamental restructuring or discarding of the institutions themselves. Once again Miller has written a play that has identified the enemy and is radical in perspective, but points his finger not at capitalism itself, but at the “bullshit of capitalism” in which powerful interests used money and influence to inhibit freedom and liberty. The implication is that once these influences have diminished, American social and political institutions will function better and more humanely.

The Great Disobedience was the last of Miller’s plays that primarily resonated with the energies of the 1930’s and the rhetoric of the Popular Front. The final speech of Mannheim in which he makes reference to Christ can be seen as rather typical of the decade and thus dismissed as simply a representation of the its time.

Jean, listen to me. I’m a strong man now. Strong as though a new thing, a new blood is transfused into me. I feel, Jean, as though.. something was actually born in here. A new son, red with a new life in him. Victor’s son, the one they couldn’t kill with Victor because things like this are not the property of a man. They belong to mankind. Long ago it was nailed to a cross, but it never died, perhaps because it’s conception lies in the constant struggle of men with masters of men. That

is its immaculateness, its divorcement from the single father. You know, Jean, there must be many men like this. There must be a new Jesus in tens of thousands walking the earth.

The significant portion of this speech to Miller's later work is not the "new Jesus" but rather the "constant struggle of men with masters of men." Even in these early works, Miller is dramatizing the struggle between competing value systems that he saw as the source of America's social problems. When Stephen Riker tells Mannheim that it is a "man's duty to get what he wants," I believe Miller is arguing (through Riker) that this mentality is the very undoing of our happiness. This devotion to getting what we want, Miller argues, is antithetical to man's struggle to answer the questions of how best to live in the world. The "master" of men is the belief system that reinforces the most selfish human instincts and genuflects to those that have lived by this creed. *The Great Disobedience*, in my view, identifies Arthur Miller as a moral radical, a confirmed, left- liberal and an evolving young playwright. What was about to change in Miller's life was the nature of the "enemy" at which he pointed his finger. This newest adversary was the subject of his last pre-war play.

Miller left Ann Arbor in 1938 and moved back to New York City. His ambition was to write for the Federal Theatre Project of the WPA, and to that end he finished the final version of the Abe Simon trilogy, *The Grass Still Grows*. When the Congress closed the FTP in 1939, Miller turned to the daunting task of trying to support himself as a writer. Miller wrote many radio plays in the years, 1939-1943, that, when combined with other non-writing jobs, brought in enough money to support

himself and his wife, Mary Slattery, a Catholic from the Middle West, whom he married in 1940.

It was during the years, 1939-1940 that Miller also wrote his most ambitious play to date entitled, *The Golden Years*. On the cover page of the manuscript, Miller has written his Brooklyn address, an alternate title (Montezuma the King) and the completion date, June 29, 1940. As I have read and reread this play, my sense of its importance in understanding Miller has greatly increased. When paired with *The Crucible*, *The Golden Years* serves as one of two major thematic directions in Miller's dramatic creations. The first links the Abe Simon trilogy with *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* in drama crafted from the playwright's own family experience. *The Crucible* and *The Golden Years* exemplify Miller's realization that history often provides crucial insight into contemporary problems and that the playwright can make evident the repetitious nature of human experience. With this awareness, then, human beings are not necessarily condemned to reliving past failures.

The ability to see the current dilemma embedded in past situations was a key element in Miller's decision to write *The Crucible* at the height of the McCarthy hearings. Similarly, this insight caused him to write *The Golden Years* in the midst of the rising tide of Fascism that had culminated in the German invasion of Poland instigating World War Two. "The plays are my autobiography," Miller told Christopher Bigsby, "I can't write plays that don't sum up where I am." ⁹ If this is

indeed true, then Miller's preoccupations changed profoundly from the writing of *The Great Disobedience* in 1938 to the completion of *The Golden Years* in 1940. Although his basic social commitments, revealed in the Michigan plays, were not abandoned, the focus of those concerns shifted to an "enemy" far more profound than Stephen Riker or Sam Roth. *The Golden Years* took aim at a force that could destroy society itself namely, the cult of fascism.

The Golden Years begins in the throne room of the great Montezuma, Emperor of the Aztec Empire. Miller has created elaborate spectacle in this play with sweeping sets and costumes consistent with his desire to create a "poetic theatre inspired by the Elizabethan models." ¹⁰ The opening scene takes place as an eclipse of the moon is about to occur. This natural event has created great anxiety in the Empire and Montezuma ponders what meaning can be derived from it. He is reminded by his scribes of the prophecy that "the world will end in the 550th year, when the full moon shall be eaten in the sky by the shadow of the sun."

Unsure whether or not the prophecy is about to be fulfilled, Montezuma orders the sacrifice of a youth and the building of a fire high enough to "reach the very face of the moon." In his foreboding, the Emperor lapses into deep introspection about his possible role in bringing about this disaster. "Do the people weep for their sons who died in my wars," he asks his counselors, "do they curse the taxes gathered in my name?" He reasons that if the world is to end then there "must be a reckoning after." But the historians can only speak about what has happened in the past, and

Montezuma is left to struggle with his fears and doubts. "Perhaps I could have been a kinder king," he muses and then his people would not be agonizing "over their sons lost in my wars."

It is significant that Miller has begun the play with this scene because it sets up the striking contrast in the internal lives of Montezuma and Hernando Cortes, who is shortly to appear on the scene. Montezuma has a deep sense that something both powerful and inevitable is taking place. This event is somehow beyond his power to prevent and yet might be the direct result of his actions. It causes him to believe that somehow the eclipse is a precursor to events that will bring him face to face with his own destiny.

This sense of history conspiring against him is reinforced when reports are brought to him that white men have landed on the coast of Mexico and have subsequently burned crops, cities and temples. Fearing a connection between this and the eclipse, Montezuma orders that prayers be said in all the temples for "the regeneration of the world." His councilors urge him to send troops to defeat the Spanish, who are only fifty miles away. "What kind of creatures must they be to burn the temple of a god," Montezuma is told, "they move like birds in the high wind."

But the Emperor says he will send no armies yet because he does not understand the relationship between the invaders and the darkening of the sky. Important here is the sense of moral responsibility and awareness of destiny that restrains Montezuma

from immediately attacking the Spanish. “It is not difficult to spring the arrows when the bows are bent,” he tells his advisors, “but not even a king may snatch them back when once they climb the sky.” Clearly Montezuma entertains the possibility that the invaders are gods themselves and that by attacking them he is countering the divine will.

In the next scene, Montezuma speaks to the boy who is to be sacrificed to the gods and tells him of the crisis of the eclipse and the “signs that for ten years have warned us.” He implores the youth to “speak well of Mexico and the people that abide here” when he meets the gods so that Montezuma’s “kingdom will not be just ashes in the wind.” More reports of the advancing Conquistadors come to the court and a confrontation takes place between Montezuma and his powerful relatives.

“The dead moon manifests the divinity of our visitors or it warns us against them,” Montezuma commands, “and I will send no army for if they be gods, who will protect their enemies?” The scene closes with the entire court watching the burning sacrifice as the eclipse passes without disaster. Interpreting this as a blessing, Montezuma decides that the Spanish are descendants of the god, Quetzal, who have come to bring a new golden age to Mexico. “Now let the white ones be welcomed into Mexico,” he says, “tonight there is a new world born.”

The play now shifts to the battlefield and the headquarters of Hernando Cortes. Despite their success in battle, the Spanish are beset with problems and internal

dissatisfaction. We learn that Cortes stole his ships from the Governor of Cuba and does not even have the approval of the Spanish government for this campaign. The men are grumbling that they have no business “penetrating 170 miles with only 400 men.” Cortes acts to crush the doubts of the men by appealing to their greed, their God and the myth of invincibility that they are promoting among the Mexicans.

Unlike Montezuma who searches for a connection between his religious beliefs and thus a moral basis and his actions, Cortes clearly separates politics and morality. When Father Diaz calls his brutality toward the Mexicans into question, Cortes tells the priest, “You have been appointed to converse with God, father, leave the politics to me.” He appeals to his troops by combining Christian symbolism (devoid of its moral implications on behavior) and avarice in the same breath. “You will be rich with the gold in Mexico where the golden Montezuma sits,” he tells them “take it in your hands.” He then says to them, “There is an empire there beyond the hills, Spaniards, God’s eye is on you, there’s a cross in your hands.” Cortes finishes his speech by stressing that the appearance of invincibility is the source of their power and that this cannot allow for retreat or compromise. The spellbinding rhetoric saves the day, and his troops recommit themselves to the pursuit of gold and God’s glory.

It requires little analysis to conclude that Miller is constructing a dramatic metaphor for the world situation in 1940. Like the Conquistadors, the Nazis had also created a myth of invincibility and historical inevitability about their conquests. Indeed,

Miller finished the play at virtually the same time that Germany invaded France and Belgium and prepared itself for what appeared to be its inevitable conquest of England. The towering figuring of the charismatic Cortes, who threatens and bribes and inspires his troops, is a clear parallel to Hitler, whose manipulative ability was a major source of his power.

Drunk with his new power and filled with a messianic vision, Cortes calls for a “Mass of Victory,” where he uses religion and greed to fuel the fire of the Spanish conquest. In a scene right out of the Nuremberg rallies, Cortes’ impassioned speech electrifies his troops. “Who will run and who will not?” he cries, “who is blessed and who is not?” The troops begin to chant, “Hernando, Hernando!!” The speech culminates with Cortes screaming “Montezuma drinks from cups of solid gold,” and the soldiers exhorting him to lead them to the conquest of the Aztecs.

Miller has drawn two cultures completely opposite in their perspectives and value systems in which the Aztecs are seemingly helpless to resist or even understand their adversaries. The play portrays the more communal nature of the Aztec religion and society as old-fashioned and unsure of itself when pitted against the power of the Spanish. This power is exemplified in the manner by which the Spanish find theological justification for their invasion. When Cortes’ mistress, Marina (a captured Aztec), asks him why he came to Mexico, he replies, “there’s gold in it, but Christ is deeper than any other thing.” For Cortes, the Spanish are “planting God in this good brown earth.” Marina is astonished most by the energy and unrelenting

confidence that Cortes has in the correctness of his mission. How could such absolute assurance be unfounded?

Act Two begins on the sunlit roof of Montezuma's temple. Cortes has entered the city, and Montezuma's advisors are urging him to trap the Spanish in causeways. But Montezuma resists saying that he will not ignore the prophecy until he meets Cortes and he knows "the word" brought by the Spanish. Clearly Montezuma could have crushed the Conquistadors at virtually any point since they landed in Mexico, yet they are empowered by the Emperor's fascination with them, and they also greatly benefit from the Aztecs' religious beliefs that do not absolutely assume divine sanction for their (the Aztecs) military and political actions. "We greet the Spaniard not with the bolted door of barbarians," Montezuma tells his advisors, "but as a race whose heritage is far greater than the slaughtering arm." How ironic that the nobility and spirituality of this culture will be the very thing that makes it most vulnerable to the invaders. Here again the parallels to the lack of will displayed by the European democracies in failing to resist the surge of fascism are clear.

Great theatrical spectacle takes place as Montezuma meets Cortes, and they engage in their first discussion. They talk happily of "exchanging wonders" of each other's worlds, and Montezuma offers to tour Cortes through the beautiful city. Cortes gives Montezuma a crucifix and Marina tells the Emperor, "They bring a gentle god, this is the greatest wonder." The first scene ends with Montezuma, turning the crucifix over and over in his hands and pondering the meaning of all that has taken place.

Despite the growing arrogance of the Spanish, Montezuma's almost mystical attraction to them increases. His desperate advisors plead with the Emperor to see the Spanish for what they are. "Perhaps there is something more than danger in Cortes eyes," Montezuma tells his council, "We must touch hands with it and when we do, it will lift us up." There is more than a slight resemblance to Neville Chamberlain when Montezuma tells his council, "be sure I see the danger, but I'll not let it grow out of my hands."

In Cortes, Miller has created an embodiment of the fascist mentality. His personal ambition is the sole reason for his existence, and it predominates over any concern with culture, history or religion. In fact it is Montezuma's tendency to project into Cortes a respect for faith and culture that is non-existent that constitutes the Spaniards greatest advantage. The arrogance and single-minded commitment to victory displayed by Cortes is interpreted by Montezuma as a sign of great purpose and hope for the future. Cortes represented the "intensely organized energies of fascism," Miller would later say, and it was the clarity and simplicity of his vision that both attracted and intimidated Montezuma. **11** Montezuma eventually succumbed to this power because his own spiritual uncertainty was irresistibly drawn to the absolute conviction of Cortes. Miller would characterize this as a "passive acceptance of fate and defeat in life," which he saw taking place in the European nations as they confronted Hitler. **12** Montezuma is fascism's victim not because he

is ignorant or stupid, but because he makes the tragic mistake of seeing Cortes as the wave of the future.

Montezuma invites Cortes into the sacred temple that towers above Mexico City to honor him and finally learn the meaning of his invasion of Mexico. But already Cortes has decided that Montezuma has “turned against us,” and he orders his generals to draw a picture of the city while Cortes distracts Montezuma’s attention. With this map, the Spanish will be able to take the city by attacking at the weakest points. Through an act of carelessness, the Spanish are observed creating the map, and in a rage Montezuma orders Cortes out of the sacred temple.

When reports reach Montezuma that 1900 Spanish troops and the Governor of Cuba have landed on the Mexican coast, the Aztecs brand Cortes an outlaw, and disillusion and despair overwhelm him. He begins to realize that Cortes is no more than a thug who covers his aggression with the appearance of a religious purpose. He realizes too that the answer to the future of the Aztec civilization does not reside with the Conquistadors. “Was ever such a fool as Montezuma,” he wails in his grief, “such a proud and pompous fool.” Resisting the demands of his lords that he attack Cortes immediately, the Emperor instead orders Cortes and his men to leave the city in one day.

As Cortes is contemplating his escape from enemies in both directions, his men find an immense treasure of gold in the burial vaults of the Aztec monarchs. “This is

sacred to them, Hernando,” Marina says while begging him not to plunder the vaults, “their heritage, their kings, their clothes are buried here.” But in the best spirit of fascism, Cortes has only contempt for anyone else’s culture and he plots to remove the gold while still leaving the city. He concludes that the only way to do this is to kidnap Montezuma. Confident he can manipulate the humanity and spiritual uncertainty of the Emperor, Cortes says, “We will take him without a blow; I know that man.”

His council who has taken to the streets to arouse the people against Cortes has abandoned Montezuma. Seeing this as the perfect excuse for seizing Montezuma, Cortes enters the temple and captures the Emperor. Montezuma puts up no resistance because his mind cannot grasp the audacity with which the invaders have behaved. His imagination is simply not equipped to handle the Spanish and their actions.

Miller now crafts a marvelous scene of confrontation between Cortes and Montezuma, a fascinating and insightful example of the irrational power of fascist thinking and behavior. Employing treachery and lies, Cortes announces to Montezuma:

Do you expect me to depart when there is such disorder in your country? Do you think me blind not to know that your nobility is holding secret consultation with you for my annihilation? Your majesty, I do not wish to begin a war on this account, and it would grieve me to destroy this lovely city, which I could do at a moment’s notice. But your conduct has been such that I cannot be expected longer to feel my soldiers are safe while you are left to your own devices unsupervised by Spaniards.

Therefore, your majesty I am willing to forgive your crimes against us and your treachery a thousand times manifested, if you will come to our quarters where you will be served and honored as you are here.

Montezuma is forced to surrender himself and is held captive at the Spanish garrison where the soldiers are feverishly melting the gold ornaments into bars for transport to the coast. The Emperor is used as protection against attack, and Cortes forces him to call off his warriors who are poised to destroy the Spanish. Appalled at the barbarity with which the Spanish lust for gold, Montezuma tells Cortes, "I believe you would smash every building into dust." "For so it is with the vulture bird whose hate for living things is so great," he tells Cortes, "that he'll spend his last heartbeat to rip the arm that presses close to bury him." Montezuma says he will call his warriors off only "for the sake of the living and the dead whom I betrayed."

This respect and value of human life even in the face of savagery is what separates Montezuma from Cortes. This is made clear in the final scene of the play after Montezuma has persuaded his soldiers to give the Spanish an escape route to the sea. As he lies dying, Montezuma rejects the efforts of the priest to baptize him. "Jesus Christ may be good above all gods," he tells Cortes, "but Christians are debased below all men." Montezuma tells Cortes that his fate will one day befall the Spanish. "See in my unmourned face, your face," he tells Cortes "and in my destiny, the destiny of all oppression."

The play ends as it began with the scribe reading the sacred prophesy to Montezuma. "Let the history say that by no hand but his own did this emperor die," says Montezuma, "for while his eyes were searching heavenward for meaning, a sword was pointing at his breast." Montezuma realizes that his great misfortune was to "seek the face of god there in the sword" and instead destroying himself by mistaking brutality and power for purpose and meaning. His last words are given over to a prediction of rebirth and victory over oppression. "There shall come again the departed one," he says, "and with him, shining brightly from his hand, a year has come, a golden year."

Miller completed *The Golden Years* in the summer of 1940. It not only marked a new kind of play for Arthur Miller, but also served as a major point of transition in his development as an artist and intellectual. "The year 1940, the end of my bachelor-youth and the Depression," he said later, "seems to me to have marked the end of a simple democratic idealism handed us by the overwhelmingly obvious evil of Hitlerism." This "simple democratic idealism" which Miller has identified as the main subject of his Michigan plays was subjected to a powerful blow that suddenly made it seem outmoded, unsatisfactory and simplistic. It became very difficult for Miller to cling to the same self-described radicalism reflected in his earlier plays. 13

The blow was the new reality forced on Miller and many other people on the Left by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. The "unthinkable" friendship pact between fascist Germany and Soviet Russia "stunned the world" according to Miller

and pulled the rug out from “the economic certainties of the radical 30’s.” For Miller, like so many other Popular Front radicals, Marxism (which provided the vocabulary for the expression of these certainties) had served the dual purpose of being a rational response to the banalities of a failed American capitalism and a moral force against the evil of the fascism. Miller actually saw Marxism as an extension of his hopes for “the salvation of the Republic.” The fact that Miller could see himself as a revolutionary, attack capitalism in his plays, promote Marxism in spirit and still want to preserve the Republic is perhaps the clearest statement of what it meant to be a Popular Front radical in the 1930’s. This heartfelt yet contradictory philosophy “the sunny air of youth,” as Miller phrased it) was shattered when the absolute distinction between good and evil vanished with the Nazi-Soviet pact. **14**

It was no longer so easy to write a play where a Ben Simon or Max Zabriski was transformed into a crusader for the right cause when it wasn’t entirely clear what the right cause was. Indeed, the identification of the enemy, a specialty of Miller in the early plays, was quite a bit more difficult now. “The truth was that with this pact,” Miller said, “there had come, as some such moment does to every generation, an end to innocence.” During the Depression it was a very simple matter to identify oneself politically by speaking the truth and raging against the injustice of the economic reality. “One had simply and directly reached out to the rational and landed on the left,” Miller would say, “but nothing was clear anymore.” **15**

Miller's identification of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the threat of fascism as the key "blow" in his thematic shift beginning with *The Great Disobedience* leaves out other changes in the national climate that surely must have also affected him and thus helps explain his evolution. Much of the political discontent expressed in plays such as *They Too Arise* was dissipated or co-opted by FDR and the New Deal. The President had taken his 1936 victory as a mandate to move the country to the left and this was manifested in the creation of the Works Progress Administration. The WPA had particular impact on the arts by creating federal projects in art, music, writing and the Federal Theatre Project. The "Living Newspapers" were extensions of the New Deal and dramatized contemporary social, economic and political problems. These presentations advocated strong government action to solve social problems by creating dramatic scenes involving film, newspaper articles and songs showing to depict the desperate plight of the "small guy." The 1938 piece entitled, *One Third of a Nation* attacked the twin problems of poverty and lack of good housing in the country.

The government itself was therefore becoming champion of the causes that Miller and other Popular Front radicals had earlier espoused. FDR himself adopted much of the language used by Max Zibriski and Ben Simon. In various speeches after 1936, the President promised to "wage unceasing warfare against our resplendent economic autocracy which sought power for themselves and enslavement for the public." He called upon Americans to "keep up the fight against the forces of privilege and greed."¹⁶ In effect, FDR and the New Deal became the voice of the

Popular Front and thus plays such as *They Too Arise* and *Honors At Dawn* were part of a larger cultural dynamic. When that dynamic shifted because of the threat of war and the rise of Congressional conservatism and the loss of New Deal momentum, Miller's work also shifted.

Further, Max Zibriski was upstaged by developments in the world of organized labor. In what would have to be considered the fulfillment of everything Max was fighting for the American labor movement in the modern sense began with the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The great CIO strike against the giant rubber companies in Akron, Ohio in 1936 developed the sit-down strike and it was the sit-down strike against the automobile industry that Miller witnessed in Flint one year later. The success of the strikes resulted in a new sense of community and cooperation among the workers and the successes continued at US Steel and other industries. The membership of the United Automobile Workers rose from 80,000 to over 400,000 after the Flint strike and similar gains were achieved by unions in other fields. The growing labor movement channeled the radical discontent of the Max Zibriskis and Ben Simons into constructive institutional action. What resulted was a new world increasingly institutionalized and bureaucratic, far beyond the milieu Miller's early plays addressed.

This is why I believe that Miller's experience can be seen as a sort of cultural roadmap for many Americans on the left during the late 30's. Miller's evolution from 1936-1940 represented the changes in many left-leaning artists and intellectuals

during the same period. Through some combination of the forces that undid the Popular Front including the onset of the War in 1939, numerous other artists, organizations and writers underwent a transition similar to that of Arthur Miller. At the time Miller was writing his most radical play, *They Too Arise*, the Group Theatre was producing Odets' most potent works. But by 1940, Odets had moved to Hollywood and the organization was about to close. It was in 1940 that Orson Wells and his Mercury Theatre made a similar shift in thematic focus from plays of social relevance to a famous production of *Julius Caesar* with the text rearranged to suggest the fascist threat of Mussolini and Hitler. The Theatre Union, which produced plays based on the worker's themes such as *Stevedore* and others, reached its peak in 1937 and was out of business by 1940. At about the same time Miller was working on *No Villain*, Elmer Rice was writing his most radical plays including *Judgment Day* and *Between Two Worlds*, yet by 1938-39 he was writing *American Landscape*, which defended American values by glorifying our democratic tradition. Robert Sherwood evolved from a the "radical" social critique, in *The Petrified Forest* in 1935 to *Idiots Delight* that expressed a dread of oncoming fascism to his 1938 play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* that celebrated the ideals upon which this country was founded. Sidney Kingsley followed a similar path in moving from his best-known play, *Dead End* (1935), a social attack that linked poverty and crime, to his play, *Patriots* (1943) which portrayed the debate between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. John Howard Lawson wrote his most radical play, *Marching Song*, the same year as Miller wrote *Honors at Dawn*, and this marked his last produced work. This same fate befell Albert Maltz, whose play *The Black Pit* (1935)

is remarkably similar to *Honors at Dawn* but lost his importance after 1937 and was never produced thereafter.

Even though there were many factors that may have contributed to Miller's slow evolution from the "certainties" of 1935 to the themes of *The Golden Years*, the fear of fascism is clearly embedded in the story of Cortes and Montezuma. And while it is true that Miller did not discard, and has not to this day, his essential objection to the bullshit of capitalism, it is undeniable the Nazi-Soviet pact marked a significant change in his outlook. Since the Soviet Union was suddenly removed as the symbolic bastion against fascism, Miller could no longer pretend that no real conflict of values existed between one capitalist power and another. Miller could no longer craft a character such as Ben Simon for whom all capitalist powers were in one category. "How could I possibly have tolerated the idea that a Nazi victory would have been no worse than that of the British or French," he said in *Timebends*, "this paradox was very much part of the radical mind-set of the thirties."¹⁷

This paradox also manifested itself in *The Golden Years*, where both Cortes and Montezuma are autocratic rulers, and yet something in their encounter causes the Emperor to see the terrible danger posed by the mindset and violence of the Spanish. Embodying the spirit of fascism clothed in the guise of religious mission, Cortes was actually in search of pure power without any larger purpose. Montezuma, embodying the spirit of an exhausted older order of things, saw in the vitality of Cortes the answer to his sense of emptiness.

Miller argues in this play that fascism will fill the emptiness in a competitive society that offers no more satisfying values than the pursuit of wealth and success. He has not abandoned his basic Popular Front views on the American economic system; rather his fear that the country was drifting into some form of fascism caused a subtle but significant shift in his artistic preoccupations. Beginning with *The Golden Years* a second stage in Miller's political and artistic outlook developed. The years between *No Villain* and *The Great Disobedience* roughly 1935-1938, saw Miller consumed with a radical energy that was focused on "exposing the fraudulence of the 1920's and the phony prestige of capitalism." The new stage of Miller's career was marked by his desire to "win an audience made up of all the people, not merely the educated or sophisticated." To them he could he could illuminate the danger that lurked just beneath the surface (fascism). This mass audience was necessary because Miller had already begun to sense he had a special interest in the "universality of human beings, their common emotions and ideas." **18**

By 1940 then, Arthur Miller had committed himself to being an artist who wrote plays that were an assertion of meaning or as he put it, to become a playwright who "was obliged to point a way out if he thought he knew what it was." **19** Miller felt that his family background, the wrenching experience of the Depression, his Jewish heritage and the world situation, all combined to give him a clear vision of "the way out." America was emerging from the economic misery of the Depression and the reliance on strikes, unions, and working class solidarity as the prime subject for his

plays was giving way to a new urgency. Beginning with *The Golden Years*, Miller's plays began to focus on [my] "fear of a looming victory of fascism here and abroad."

20

Again, I need to emphasize that it would be a mistake to conclude that Miller abandoned the themes of his earlier plays because he was consumed with the struggle against Hitler. In fact, in some ways Hitler was less significant to Miller than his fear of the looming victory of fascism here as well as abroad. The radicalism of Arthur Miller took a slightly different turn in 1940 in that he became the clarion bell warning of the appearance of the fascist impulse in American life. Fascism was not just something manifested in the evil of Hitler, Franco and Mussolini which threatened to eliminate Jews from the planet. Fascism for Miller was "where the rank pools of instinct collected, the dark atavisms within man." Fascism may have its ultimate triumph with the Nazis but it was everywhere where "parochial narrowness of mind, prejudices, racism and the irrational" prevailed. **21**

By becoming the enemy of fascism in general, Miller set a course to put him in conflict with the main course of American foreign policy and social attitudes for the next thirty years. His identity as a radical playwright has, to a substantial degree, been the product of an intense dislike that Americans have for artists and intellectuals who point out the narrowness of mind, prejudice, racism and irrational behavior in our nation. Miller adopted the unenviable task of identifying the potentially fascist impulses in American life to an ungrateful nation. The parochial

narrowness of mind that prevented Joe Keller from seeing that he had a responsibility larger than his own family; the stupid prejudices that kept Willy Loman enslaved to false values; the irrational power of superstition and self-interest that infected Salem; all these were the workings of the dark inner forces activated by fascism. It was Miller's anti-fascist spirit and his conviction that a playwright ought to be "the subconscious of the country" that constituted the nature of his radicalism in the decade of the 1940's. **22**

Miller spent the wartime years (1941-1945) living in New York after having been rejected for medical reasons from service in the Army. During this period he wrote his first Broadway play and other dramatic works and radio scripts as well as the novel, *Focus* and a book entitled *Situation Normal*. He was about to endure the most disillusioning experiences in his life as he came to believe that most Americans simply did not share his views on the moral and ideological purpose for the war in Europe and Asia.

ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), pp. 265-267.
2. Ibid., pp. 93-94. For an excellent discussion of the many artists and intellectuals who shared Miller's conviction in this period that art ought to be of use in changing society, see Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, (New York: Verso, 2000) especially his chapter entitled, "Ballads for Americans: Aesthetic Ideologies," pp. 115-159.
3. Ibid., p. 113.
4. Ibid., p. 184.
5. Alan Lawson, *The Failure of Individual Liberalism* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1971), p. 14.
6. *Timebends*, p. 91.
7. Robert A. Martin, *Arthur Miller: New Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1982), p. 31.

8. *Timebends*, p. 93.
9. Christopher Bigsby, *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*
(Cambridge U.K: 1997), p. 1.
10. Arthur Miller, *The Golden Years and The Man Who Had All The Luck*
(London: Methuen, 1989), p. 5.
11. *The Golden Years*, p. 8.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
13. *Timebends*, p.82.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-85.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
16. Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression* (New York: Times Books, 1984),
p. 275.
17. *Timebends*, p. 84.

18. Ibid., p. 85.

19. Ibid., p. 84.

20. Ibid., p. 85.

21. Ibid., p. 82.

22. Robert A. Martin, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 131.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIGHTING NAZIS AND REACHING

BROADWAY

THE WAR-TIME PLAYS

Despite the many critics and scholars who have concerned themselves with Arthur Miller, they have written little about the impact of the wartime years (1941-1945) on Miller's career. An examination of his activity during these years offers a more complete explanation of how his political and artistic preoccupations changed after the 1930's. In fact, Miller was as profoundly influenced by these years as he was by the Depression and University of Michigan periods. It was during World War Two that the Popular Front radical experienced a profound sense of disillusion that would shape the future direction of his life in the theatre. For Miller, the War was fought in defense of the values of democracy, freedom and the commitment to the common good that was such an important part of the spirit of the New Deal. What he witnessed at home, however, was greed, racism and little appreciation for the ideological justifications for the war effort. He concluded that America had learned very little from the experience of the 1930's and this realization became one of the most important themes in his subsequent work.

From the standpoint of a Popular Front radical, World War Two should have been the natural culmination of the struggle between progressive and reactionary forces. The anti-fascist alliance that united the intellectuals of the left during the 1930's should have seen the destruction of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan as a confirmation of the correctness of their cause. The social and political ideas of people like Arthur Miller, expressed most concretely by the policies of the New Deal, would be expected to triumph and form the basis for post-war American life. In short, for a Popular Front radical, the War years ought to have culminated with America singing

the same song as Abe Simon in *The Grass Still Grows*, “yes, Esther, there’s new ways to live, young ways, and we gotta learn them.” ¹

Yet, what Arthur Miller actually encountered while living in New York City during the war convinced him that America had changed very little. The disillusioning effect of this realization resonated thereafter. To his shock he discovered that the American people had little ideological commitment beyond victory in the massive war effort. Rather than participating in a holy war to support democracy and destroy fascism, the American people in the words of Chris Keller from *All My Sons* were “not changed at all, there was no meaning in it here, the whole thing to them was a kind of a- bus accident.”²

Not only were Americans seemingly unmotivated by ideological passion or a high moral purpose during the war, but also Miller witnessed greed, fraud and accumulation of substantial wealth by individuals who profited from it. Many of these impressions were reflected in the plot and characters of subsequent plays. Miller has often commented about his bewilderment that it was only a few years that separated the feeling that New Deal policies were moving the entire culture to the left and that the language of radical change was being mouthed even by those people who were shaping the national destiny to a wartime climate where feelings of solidarity and human community were dead. In despair, Miller mused in 1944 that America seemed to be fighting to preserve “free enterprise” with the slogan, “Keep America the same.”³

Keeping America the same had other horrifying meanings for the Popular Front radical. Because Miller was physically ineligible for the draft, he worked on the home front throughout the war. While at the New York Naval Yards and on tour of US army camps gathering material for a film, *The Story of GI Joe*, Miller encountered virulent anti-Semitism and racism of a kind and intensity he had never experienced in his life before even during the Depression. More disturbing still was Miller's growing awareness of a native fascism that was particularly active in New York most notably through the activities of violent groups such as the Christian Front. At the very moment when America was engaged in fighting an anti-fascist struggle in Europe and Asia, fascism and anti-Semitism at home reached their strongest points. The disillusioning impact of these developments found direct expression in Miller's 1944 play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, and his 1945 novel, *Focus*.

The major biographical events of the war years for Miller revolve around his marriage in 1940 to Grace Slattery and his attempt to make ends meet by writing. During the period 1941-1943, Miller wrote radio plays and scripts for numerous programs including the Columbia Workshop (CBS) and Cavalcade of America (NBC). In addition to these radio works, Miller also wrote two full-length plays, *The Half Bridge* and *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, and a one-act play, *That They May Win*. In the last year of the war, he wrote his only novel, *Focus*, and began work on his first great play, *All My Sons*, which was completed in 1947.

The vast majority of Miller's radio scripts were written for light entertainment and intended for mass audiences on the major radio networks. In describing these plays, Miller called them simply a means of support. "The only good part was you could do them quickly," he remarked in a 1990 conversation, "I could write one in a morning and if I did six or eight of them, I'd get two hundred and fifty dollars a piece." "I could live pretty good," he continued, "life was cheap then and my wife was working." ⁴ In examining some of these plays I found that Miller was being accurate in describing them as mass-produced. However, in my conversation with him in East Lansing, Michigan in 1988, he mentioned one particular radio script that he thought I should examine. The one interesting departure from the "light" quality of these scripts is the 1941 play written for the Columbia Workshop and performed over CBS entitled, *The Pussycat and the Expert Plumber Who Was a Man*. The significance of this short play is its political thrust and what this theme reveals about the direction of Miller's thought during the early stages of the War.

The plot of this story concerns the mayor of a small city who is startled to find that his cat, named Tom has the ability to talk. Not only can he talk; he has big plans to use this remarkable skill for his own benefit. Using the inside information he has overheard in the bedroom, he informs the mayor that he is aware of the tax cheating and other illegal activities undertaken by his "master" and that he will communicate this information unless the mayor supports the cat's political ambitions. Tom wants first to be mayor, then governor and unless he gets public endorsements he will,

“inform on the private scandal of every person, and if they don’t have one [I will] make one up.” “This isn’t blackmail,” Tom says, “its politics.”

Tom is scornful about the fear that people will never vote for someone about whom they know nothing. “They will vote for a **name** and with the papers on my side by the time people go to the polls they won’t know what they’re voting for,” Tom says. Indeed the combination of numerous public endorsements and his reclusive avoidance of publicity make Tom a virtual cult figure with the public. Women everywhere approve of his modesty in staying at home and many people promise to vote for him just to see what he looks like.

Winning the mayor’s job easily, Tom begins to plot to take the governor’s office in the upcoming elections. He begins to attract a cadre of followers who ape his cynical attitude about the electorate. “Every important man has something in his past he’s so ashamed of, he’d sell his soul for it,” Tom tells his men, “but no prospective blackmailer has a clean enough record himself to do what I’ve done.” He promises to connect with the “cat network until we’ve got something on every politician in this state.” Unaware that Tom is a cat and feeding off the growing legend created by the press, the public begins to idolize their new hero. “I’m the perfect candidate because I can be everything to everybody,” Tom says, “ I am nothing, with no past and the ideal record.... **None.**”

Tom begins to create a political philosophy based on his personal experience. He has seen life at the lowest and the highest level and has determined that “the one thing a man fears most is the loss of his good name.” “Man is evil in his own eyes and the only way he can find respect for himself is by getting other people to say he’s a nice fellow,” he tells his supporters, “the only man who’d expose me is one who really believes he’s upright and clean, and such a man does not exist in the world.” As Tom and his political followers gather for the party convention that will nominate him governor, a young plumber, Sam sneaks into the room and discovers that the mysterious Tom is actually a cat. Seeing that the plumber is not powerful and probably can’t be blackmailed, Tom offers him a large amount of money to keep quiet. When this fails, Tom engages Sam in a dialogue aimed at finding out what it will take to keep the young man from denouncing Tom as a fraud.

The two debate the difference between a man and a cat. “A man is different because a man has ideals,” Sam says, “does a cat have ideals?” “Certainly,” says Tom, “my ideal is to become the most powerful individual in the state.” Unable to bribe Sam, Tom threatens that, “if you open your mouth about this to a soul, your reputation isn’t worth a tin dime, I’ll smear you like mud.” When Sam asks what a cat would do in his place, Tom answers, “same as a man cause men are like cats.” But Sam is confident that a cat could never be an expert plumber and that certainly is one difference between a man and a cat. He forces Tom to confess the sham to the entire convention. Sam has proven to be incorruptible because he values his principles more

than his good name (even if his sole principle is that a cat could never be an expert plumber and thus not a man)

Alone again with the mayor, Tom the cat speaks his last words. “The difference is that a cat will do anything, the worst things, to fill his stomach,” he says to his old master, “but a man will actually prefer to stay poor because of an ideal.” “Some men, some useful men, like expert plumbers,” he reasons, “are so proud of their usefulness that they don’t need the respect of their neighbors and so they aren’t afraid to speak the truth.” Giving up his political ambitions, Tom the cat muses that he could never be President, because some men are not like cats, they would actually prefer to stay poor rather than betray their principles. At the end of the story, Tom the cat returns to the good old days of “being a cat again.”

This radio play is the only one mentioned by Miller in *Timebends* and it is also the only one of these scripts reprinted after he had established his career. It is not insignificant that he called this “my political radio play” because, despite the light and humorous nature of the script, Miller certainly has something to say about contemporary (1941) politics. The play needs to be viewed in relation to the political climate of the time both at home and in Europe. Written during the summer of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the apparent triumph of Fascism in the war, this parable clearly serves as a comment on the American political scene.

Tom's ideals are absolutely practical and brutal and thus are limited to those that lead to the acquisition of power for its own sake. A cat has no time for anything else but staying alive and eating well, and thus his ideals are merely an extension of his base instincts. "My ideal is to become the most powerful individual in the state," he boasts and his prime qualification is that "I can be everything to everybody because I am nothing, with no past." The "ideal record" for this rising star is none whatsoever, and the ideal means of gaining power is to use blackmail and greed to inspire loyalty.

Miller is painting an unflattering picture of the political attitudes and general sophistication of Americans. Early in the play one woman turns to the other and expresses her political support for the man she has never seen. "I think he's very modest and why shouldn't he stay at home," she tells her friend, "people will vote for him just to see what he looks like, and besides a man has a right to his privacy." With this level of political discrimination, the more insipid the candidate, the better it will be for him. Near the end of the play, Tom makes a speech that I interpret as the essence of a Fascist mindset. "I will run away with the elections, gentlemen," he tells the men in the room, "because all I am is a piece of fur with some vital information and a future; now, what's the verdict?"

Pussycat and the Plumber is a parable that argues that the pursuit of pure power, the lack of any program based on ethical principles and the seduction of an uncritical public, which worships leaders only when they know nothing about them, is a prescription for fascism. Miller must have feared that his own country possessed

these tendencies, and this play was one of two works that suggested such a belief. Indeed, the political and social climate in the nation in 1940 and 1941 seemed to reinforce this view. The power of the isolationist movement exemplified by organizations such as The America First Committee not only denied the threat of fascism to America but often argued that pressure to oppose fascism was coming from the Jews. 5

Four years later, Miller would return to the theme of American fascism in writing his novel, *Focus*. There can be little doubt however that Miller was exhibiting an increasing anxiety about the political situation in the nation on the eve of America's entrance into the war. His next major work was written during the grim days of 1942 when the war was going badly for America and dealt directly with the Nazi threat. This play is called *The Half Bridge*, which was completed in 1943 just as Miller was about to embark on a tour of American army camps gathering material for the screenplay, *The Story of GI Joe*.

The Half Bridge is a badly written play that nonetheless has several very interesting facets. As is true with virtually all Miller plays, *The Half Bridge* focuses on the moral transformation of the main character, in this case an American sailor, Mark Donegal. In many ways this play resembles the movie script, *Casablanca*, with Mr. Donegal sharing many of the same characteristics of the Humphrey Bogart character in that film. Like "Mr. Rick" Mark Donegal is a cynical, tough-talking American who displays contempt for any ideology other than self-interest. Also like his counterpart

in *Casablanca*, Donegal is brought out of his moral lethargy to fight the forces of evil through the love of a woman. In the end, however, he gets the girl and commits himself to some vaguely defined communalism that echoes Miller's earliest plays.

Only scholar Christopher Bigsby has written any critical commentary on this play, and even Mr. Bigsby devotes but one paragraph to discussing "the weakest of [Miller's] apprentice plays."⁶ Yet important insight can be gained about Miller's attitudes during this time by comparing the relationship between the evolution of Mark Donegal's moral consciousness and that of the playwright himself. I am also struck by the similarity between the alienation and despair in Donegal and that of the major character in Miller's novel, *Focus*. Both of these characters discover that only through clear moral action can they overcome their cynical self-absorption covering their unhappiness. It is my assertion that these same emotions were present in Miller as he reacted to the various events in American life during the War. Perhaps this is why the play ends with some of the same radical (sounding) language that Miller gave to his University of Michigan plays.

Mark Donegal is chief mate on the *Bangkok Star* an American commercial boat sailing out of New Orleans in the last days before the country entered World War Two. Mark is a tough veteran of several decades of sailing throughout the world and has made a reputation as a man who is fearless in fulfilling whatever mission he is paid to undertake. As the play opens, Mark is delivering a man into the hands of a German agent, named Luther who pays him a handsome amount. Mark does not

usually concern himself with the details of his cargo, but when he asks why Luther wants the man so badly he is told, “he wrote letters to the wrong people.” Luther, who we gradually discover is a Gestapo agent, tries to learn how much this man told Mark about his anti-Nazi activities. Mark declines to give this information, but not for any patriotic reason, but because Luther refuses to pay him more money.

This creates the familiar Miller plot structure in which the main character begins a journey of awareness that leads to an alteration of one’s moral point of view and a new self-definition. Mark Donegal’s transformation into a powerful force against Dr. Luther constitutes the central dramatic action of the play. Two events are key factors in this moral regeneration. First, Mark’s longtime shipmate, August Kruger, is discovered to be a fugitive from Nazi justice. Secondly, Mark falls in love with Anna Walden, who becomes a target of Luther’s evil plans, thus pulling Mark into deadly enmity with the Gestapo agent. But like so many of Miller’s other heroes, Mark does everything possible to keep from taking action based on any moral principles.

Instead of reacting with disgust and revulsion to the reality of allowing his ship to do the bidding of German agents, Donegal instead dreams of having someplace “bigger than yourself, where there is peace for the heart.” Despite this vague yearning for a meaning in life beyond the trivial, Mark concludes that he will never find it. “There’s no flower that won’t fade away as soon as you touch it,” he tells a sailor friend, “we’re in the right business, always moving.” Midway through the first act, the dialogue reveals why Mark has grown so cynical about his life and the lack of any

meaning in the world. The young and beautiful Anna (who astonishingly for Mark's love interest in a 1941 play is Creole) is disturbed by the anger and disillusion communicated by Mark. She confronts Donegal by saying to him, "I don't understand, what do you want?"

Mark Donegal's answer to this question is a very significant clue to the feelings of the playwright and justifies the importance of this play in tracing Miller's political development. "Christ almighty, Anna, you don't know what we lost in this country," he tells his lover, "nobody seems to remember, it's all gone, lost." Referring to the decade of the 1930's, Donegal tells her that, "those climbing years, every day, you didn't want to sleep, tomorrow couldn't come fast enough, we were moving upward, upward like on a train." Then he tells her the most crucial thing that he misses from those days when he says, "You belonged to the biggest thing in the world, you belonged, am I clear?" "People weren't so three for a penny" he tells her, "American democracy is all tapped out." His dream has now become to accumulate enough money to "escape" to a place where "people are big, and generous and happy." "I want to spread myself over a lot of people like I used to," he tells her, "and you can only do that with money."

So, whereas Rick in *Casablanca* grows cynical and greedy because of a failed romance, Mark Donegal displays the same characteristics because he no longer understands the world and seeks to escape to some isolated place where he can make his own life. At the end of the first act, Luther offers to make Mark rich enough to go

anywhere he wants by using the great speed of the *Bangkok Star* to transform it into a pirate vessel and using the stolen cargo to enrich both the German agent and Donegal. “The world is falling apart, and the wealth of the world rides on the seas,” the Nazi tells Mark. “The future belongs not to the man in the room with a view, not to the man in the counting house,” Luther tells him, “ but to the man who’ll sail the seas and take, take what he’s got the wit and daring enough to take.”

This speech is remarkably similar to those of Cortes in *The Golden Years*, and certainly Miller has once again put his finger on the essence of what he considers to be the fascist mentality. For Miller, the lack of any concern for humanity or any moral principles beyond the self-serving is a key ingredient in fascist behavior whether it takes place in Germany or Mexico or Michigan. Luther tries to appeal to Mark’s lusting, wild, rebellious spirit and use this to interest him in the piracy scheme. In effect, Luther is suggesting in a subtle way that what Donegal is yearning for is the very thing that he (fascism) can provide. “I need the son of a wealthy father who walked out of his university to see what it was like to be an ironworker,” he tells Mark, “ the man who was a rebel, the man who should have been in Germany.”

As act one closes, Luther presses Mark for an answer and the American torments over the moral implications of such an action. “Is this what my life adds up to?” he asks Luther. “That’s what the world adds up to,” Luther replies, “ this is your year, create new rules with a giant hand.” Luther offers a critique of a failed America of the 1920’s and 1930’s, searching for its soul, and identifies Mark’s life as an embodiment

of that exploration. He convinces Donegal that getting untold wealth through piracy has actually been what he (Mark) has been seeking.” Finally, Mark accepts the proposition and begins the process of outfitting his vessel for piracy. “What are you doing this for?” Kruger asks Mark, and failing to get an answer leads him to the awful conclusion: “ Mark, you want to die!”

Miller has commented that all of his plays are, more or less, autobiographical and therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the metaphorical statement about Mark’s spiritual degeneration and feelings of alienation at least to some degree reflect that of the playwright in the early war years. It is also consistent with Miller’s methods to conclude that this play is equally focused on a similar degeneration of the national spirit of which Donegal is representative. “I am a lonely man out of my time, just like you are a lonely man out of yours,” the Captain of the ship tells Mark, “we have nothing left but ourselves.” “Lonely is the word I know, tear down the world and take what’s floating loose and die suddenly,” he tells Anna, “that’s the wisdom, sister, I’m starting a new bible, believe in yourself.”

What is revealed in Act Two is that cynicism is often merely idealism and naiveté expressed negatively. Mark Donegal, like the playwright, is a deeply idealistic man. The love and moral goodness of Anna gradually breaks through the mask of denial that covers Mark’s true feelings. As his love for Anna grows, Mark discovers something to live for and he plots to destroy the German plans for the ship. Kruger urges him simply to flee and let the Gestapo have the boat. “It is no use to fight them,

Fascism is only a new name for Mankind," he tells Donegal, " whatever good there is in the world is an accident." "It's not the world gone bad," Mark replies, "it's me, don't you see, I'm a punk." Here once again is the moment of transformation when Miller's principal character realizes that he does indeed possess the power to change the world. Here once again is Miller the playwright focusing the action not on Fascism or Capitalism or Communism but instead on the struggle of an individual with moral inertia in the face of social injustice.

The rest of the play is taken up with an elaborate scheme to overthrow the evil men who control the ship and the entire third act is an action thriller that takes place in the bowels of the vessel. At the crucial moment when Mark is about to attempt the taking of the ship he begins to falter and question the wisdom of his actions. Falling back on the cynical pessimism expressed in the first act he says, "Look out the window, Anna, there's our future, the man with the gun." But Anna is Donegal's moral rock as she berates him, [are we to just say] "come on world, strike me down, I'll be obedient, I'll die like a cow?" "All right, the world pushes you to the grave, all right it's hard to fight death," she declares, "but then the world has got to be changed so we can live, and if you gotta die, then die changing it."

Typically, Miller (through Anna) makes no attempt to suggest what changes she is referring to, but apparently her love for him and her communication of a passion to engage the world in some generally energetic way is enough to fortify Mark. He commits himself to destroying Luther. In the last scene Luther has cornered Mark

with revolver drawn and it seems that Mark's fate is sealed. "You forty-four-caliber rulers of the world, throw us to the snails, knock off a billion twenty-buck suckers," Mark sneers, " but a bridge is building around the world where every man will walk." This bridge will be full of "the Irish with the Jews and the black with the white," he promises Luther, "and we'll live to hang you over the edges of the sky." Not surprisingly, Donegal turns the tables and the Nazis are defeated. With arm around his girl, and the sea breeze in his face, Mark Donegal sails into the future with the words, " Come, Anna, I'll show you what it is to live."

What are we to make of this play that has remained mired in obscurity for nearly sixty years? The most obvious reason for the obscurity of this play is the poor quality of the writing. But Miller was struggling to find a way to tell a story that had larger significance than the details of the plot, and his failure was more a matter of form than intention. *The Half Bridge* contains many elements found in Miller's later work that needed only a more skilled means of dramatic expression. Indeed, the title of the play was an attempt to create a metaphor for the meaning of the work itself. "We're built with half a bridge sticking out of our hearts," Mark says to Anna, "looking for the other half that fits so we can cross over into someone else." The price Mark has paid for living in isolation is his feelings of meaninglessness and despair over his wasted life. His search for personal fulfillment and meaning without a connection to the men and women around him has left him cynical and selfish. In short, the play can be seen as a dramatic depiction of the price that an individual pays for anti-social behavior for personal gain.

What I believe Miller was trying to do was “lift” the story of Mark Donegal to the level of a fable by having the major character “represent” elements of the American mentality (at least as Miller saw them in 1941-43). What intrigues is how Miller must have felt about America when he was writing this play. One week after his marriage to Mary Slattery in 1940, Miller left on the freighter SS *Copa Copa* to gather information about life at sea for the writing of *The Half Bridge*. Originally the play was about a group of Germans in the South Pacific who under the pretext of exploring for minerals were secretly arranging to set up Nazi bases. His exposure to the sailors on that voyage solidified in his mind the idea that America was finding “hope where we could in illusions” and that the country suffered from “a stagnating and defeated spirit.”⁷ This defeated spirit was the essence of Mark Donegal’s personality and the play was an exploration of the nature of this defeated spirit and the hope for a rebirth of idealism.

The two competing forces in the play (and also within Donegal’s psyche) were on one side, the cynical and selfish motivations for personal profit that drove Mark into the arms of the Nazis. In Miller’s words this represented “fascism, where the rank pools of instinct collected.”⁸ This was the side of Donegal (read America) that believed that “democracy was all tapped out” and that the future belonged to the man who is daring enough to take what he wants. Mark’s idealistic nature has been perverted to selfish hopelessness and what he calls the religion of himself. Loneliness is the only outcome of this unconnected point of view and fascism is the natural expression of the isolated

and narcissistic individual. Thus, the real fascists in this play are not the Nazis (they are mere thugs) but rather people like Mark Donegal, who have allowed the despair of the Depression years to poison their dreams for a better world. "Fascism is only a new name for mankind, whatever good is in the world is only an accident," Kruger says to Donegal and it takes Mark the entire play to reject that statement.

The rediscovery of Mark Donegal's idealism is the central metaphor of the play, and it expressed both a struggle in Miller's life and one that he felt existed in the country as a whole. Once again the words, "the world has got to change," come from a character in Miller's play and for the last time this change is expressed in the language of the 1930's. When Anna tells Mark, "if you've gotta die, then die changing it," it betrays Miller's conviction that fundamental social transformation was still possible in 1941. Using language similar to the "transformation" speeches of Abe Simon and Max Zibriski, Donegal lays out his vision for the future. "A bridge is building around the world where every man will walk," Mark says, "the Irish with the Jews, and the black with the white, stronger together than any steel."

This play therefore was both the last play of Miller's 1930's style and the first play of his more mature method. It was unsuccessful because it strove to create a theatrical metaphor (as did his future plays) but too often fell into the dialogue of Odets like naturalism. It was an attempt by Miller to write a fable that was a critique of the American spirit and character at the beginning of the war. He was frustrated perhaps

by the outlines of his plot and the stilted nature of much of the dialogue and after the first writing, put the play away for good.

Where *The Half Bridge* failed in its attempt to enlarge the American experience into fable, Miller's next play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* was more successful. This play, completed in 1944 and given a four-day run on Broadway, was originally a novel that Miller began in 1940. Similar to the play itself, the novel tells the story of David, who lives in a small community and is the recipient of unexplained good fortune. A sense of injustice over his advantage torments him and he seeks to find some principle that can explain why some people prosper and some do not. Unable to tolerate the failure of his friend, Amos, he drifts into madness and finally suicide. The publishers rejected the novel largely because it was a story better told on the stage. Miller rewrote the tale in play form and enlarged it into more of a stylized exemplary tale than a realistic psychological study.⁹ It was this enlargement of style from naturalism to metaphorical realism that would identify this play as Miller's first major (although commercially unsuccessful) work.

Arthur Miller calls *Luck* a Depression story and it took lengthy reflection on my part to agree with that assessment. A careful analysis also reveals that the play contains important themes that are submerged beneath the surface of the story of a man who can no longer live with his good fortune. David Frieber is twenty years old (but looks older) and works at Shory's Feed and Cement Store in a small Middle Western town. David wants to be an auto mechanic and dreams of owning his own repair shop. As

the play begins, Shory, the owner of the shop and his friend, JB, are discussing the extraordinary prospects for David's life. "David is the only boy I ever met who never makes a mistake," JB says to Shory, "no father, mother or education but when I look at him, everything seems possible again." To JB, David has "that smell of luck" which "hangs on him like a coat." These feelings come from the fact that good fortune seems to follow David wherever he goes. From his childhood when he sold peanuts at a stand to the thriving part time business he has built fixing cars, David seems to have the magic touch.

David himself is modest and a little embarrassed at his success and his efforts are focused on saving enough money to marry Hester Falk. Having already lost his parents, he has quit school to work at the shop (and his sideline repair business) in an effort to accomplish this goal. Hester is also in love with David, but she lives at home with her controlling father, who is violently opposed to her relationship with David. Her father has virtually mandated that, after graduating from high school, she enroll in a teachers college that is located seventy miles from the town. David is afraid of her leaving and resents her father forcing her to leave town. David is conflicted about his next course of action and is advised by Shory to wait to see what happens. "Join the human race and wait," Shory tells him, you have always done best by keeping your mouth shut and waiting." Commenting on his what he considers his rather unearned good fortune, David replies, "I've been waiting all my life."

Set against the David-Hester relationship is the story of Patterson Beeves and his son, Amos who is a baseball prodigy with dreams of pitching in the major leagues. Patterson has worked tirelessly with his son since infancy to nurture his baseball talent. Amos has spent endless winter nights in the Beeve's basement throwing baseballs at a target made by his father and thus has developed great control and intense concentration. Patterson brags about his son in much the same way that Joe Keller and Willy Loman boast about their sons, Chris and Biff. Clearly, Amos should be the one with all the luck. He has a loving father who is devoted to him and he has sacrificed everything to pursue his dream of being a baseball star.

The absolute commitment of Amos Beeves to a baseball career causes doubts to appear in the mind of David. "Nobody ever told me what I was supposed to be," he tells Shory, "I thought if I just waited somebody or something would tell me what I was supposed to be, where I was supposed to go next." But the one thing he is sure of is his love for Hester and together they plot possible ways of overcoming her father's opposition and getting married. His friends assure him that with his skill and good fortune he could expand his repair business to "service the biggest tractor farms in the state," "It's everything we wanted," Hester says to David in their first scene together, "build your business here and make me your wife." This fills David with a sense of purpose and self-definition and he determines to ask for Hester's hand. So, like Amos Beeves, David Frieber will have taken his destiny by the hand and firmly gained control of his own life by the exercise of his own will.

This sense of purpose, however, is short lived as David encounters Hester's father, Andrew Falk. "Nobody but me knows who you are," Falk tells David "You're a lost soul, a lost man. To Falk, David Frieber is a man without any sense of who he is. "The man Hester marries is going to know what he's about," Falk tells David, "he's going to be a steady man that I can trust with what I made in this world." David is a man who in Falk's eyes doesn't know "where he came from and where he's going." The long scene ends with Falk threatening to shoot David if he ever sets foot on his property.

The accusation that he doesn't know who he is penetrates David because it speaks to his secret fear about the lack of a clear direction in his life. Aside from always knowing that he would end up with Hester, David doesn't understand himself and can't really account for the good fortune that seems to accompany him. Like Mark Donegal in *The Half Bridge*, David has a vague sense of wanting something "bigger than myself" but doesn't seem to be able to articulate what that "something" is. So, David turns to his friends for their life philosophies in the hope that this might inspire the necessary insight into his own destiny.

Shory attempts to comfort David into forgetting Hester by encouraging him to realize that "a man is a jellyfish laying on the beach and a wave comes along and pulls him back into the sea, while he floats along on currents that he can't even feel." Shory tells David that there is no explanation for life's experiences and "the jellyfish is back on the beach again never knowing why." When David protests this, Shory tells him,

“When you can cover the moon with an overcoat you can control the tides, until then take a deep breath and start living like you were born today.” As I will suggest later it is interesting to consider the implications of this speech in relation to Miller’s biography. What Shory is essentially saying is that we shouldn’t question the larger forces that seem to control our lives, rather, it is wiser to accept the fact that we are helpless to explain these things. No such character or speech was present in Miller’s pre-war plays, and it suggests an ambivalence Miller was encountering in his own feelings about his career and the larger fate of the nation.¹⁰

David’s good fortune once again prevails when soon after this scene, Andrew Falk is killed in a traffic accident and the way is cleared for Hester and David to be married. Falk had run out of gasoline near Shory’s garage and refused to accept David’s help in pushing the car out of the road. While struggling with the car in the dark, Falk was hit and killed by a driver who could not stop in time. David is terribly uncomfortable with his feelings of both guilt and elation at the incredible luck that now made it possible for him to marry the girl of his dreams. For Shory, this is simply more evidence that blind luck and nothing else explains life like “the jellyfish on the beach.” The first scene ends with Esther countering Shory’s attempts to make David a fatalist like himself. “You’re always trying to make him like you are, inside I mean,” she tells Shory, “but Davey can do anything he puts his mind to, anything in the world.”

The second scene in the first act takes place in the interior of Shory's barn that David uses as a repair shop. David has gained a reputation as a skilled mechanic and has acquired a list of customers who bring their cars to him for repair. It is David's plan to build up enough business to pay for his own garage. As the scene opens, he is working on a mysterious problem with a six-month old car owned by an influential and wealthy man. If he is able to solve this difficult mechanical problem and please this man, David will have opened himself to the possibility of big contracts with many other important people.

The problem appears to be without solution, and David is about to give up when he encounters a man who wanders into the barn and introduces himself as a fellow mechanic who has come to town with the hope of opening a repair garage. The man is a German immigrant, Gus Eberson who has been a mechanic at the River Rouge plant in Michigan where "I was five years and had not one good friend." He lends his expertise to the project, discovers the problem and the two make plans to work all night to make the repair. David falls asleep in the process and when he wakes up the repairs have been completed and his tools are nicely staked in the corner.

Since no one is aware of the assistance of Gus, David has to live with the fraudulence he feels as Shory, JB and the others proclaim him a mechanical genius. David is stampeded into accepting the many offers of financial assistance to open his new garage. "I don't know anything about the science of it," he says guiltily of starting a business, "I really don't know anything." "You've never made a mistake in your life,

don't make one now," JB says to David, " You got a life like a beam of sunshine, what's holdin you down-laugh!" But David cannot join in the celebration of his "triumph" because he knows he doesn't deserve it. As act one closes, David is the reluctant hero of his own life, feeling that he neither understands himself or the process by which these good things have happened to him.

Act two opens three years later with David and Hester living happily in the former Falk house. Gus has failed to make a success of his own repair shop and has joined David's booming garage. The only aspect of David's life that is not perfect is the inability of the couple to conceive a child. David resists the efforts of his friends to see a doctor because he wants the natural process of childbirth to work itself out without anything that contradicts what should happen. "Why do you live by the awards of some cloudy court of justice?" Gus says to him, "go to a doctor; biology always decides, there is no justice in the world." David counters this by saying, "If people don't receive according to what they deserve inside then we're living in a madhouse." "A madhouse, yes!!" Gus responds, "that's a wonderful word for it."

David Frieber has already joined the list of Miller's principal characters who refuse to live their lives without asking the question "what is the right way to live in the world?"¹¹ David cannot accept the possibility that no answer exists for why some people are fortunate and others suffer, and this torments him into a desperate attempt to prove to himself that he deserves his good fortune. It was Gus who actually fixed the car that won David his initial fame resulting in his getting a repair shop, and it has

been the well-connected customers of David's shop who have helped him wisely invest in several other enterprises. Driven by his conviction that his fortune is undeserved ("he suffers from an overdeveloped sense of responsibility," says Gus), David decides to invest in the raising of mink for profit. This venture will be completely his idea and dependent entirely on his own efforts to determine success or failure with luck playing no part.

"When you send a load of skins to New York, you know *you* did something, not like making money out of something you happen to own," David tells Gus, "it's because of *you* what *you are* that keeps them from dying." Finding this kind of moral wrangling amusing, Gus replies, "You stole what you have, you are a thief?" David then responds by asking, "Does a thing really belong to you because your name is on it?" "Don't you have to feel you're smart enough, or strong enough, or good enough, or something enough to have won it before it's really yours?" David anguishes. Gus and Hester finally give into this seemingly mad venture, and David adds the mink-raising venture to his business portfolio.

The second scene of Act Two takes place on the evening of the day Amos Beeves has pitched a big game in front of a scout from the Detroit Tigers. A large gathering of people waits at David's house for the scout to arrive and deliver the expected happy news about signing Amos to a contract. David ponders the joy he feels in Amos and Patterson's finally getting what they want and deserve. "Me planning it this way for such a long time with him practicing down the basement," Patterson says to David, "

just shows you how things work themselves out.” David takes great comfort in knowing that something has worked out fairly because of planning and hard work. “I mean you look at all the people you know, eating their hearts out for some little thing they got every reason to have,” he tells Patterson, “and for no good reason just can’t seem to lay hands on it.”

It is not just a desire, however, to understand some hidden law behind success and failure that drives David Frier. David cannot tolerate the anxiety of being “the lucky one” when failure and unhappiness seem to befall virtually everyone else. He yearns to be the same as everyone else and thus the good fortune coming to Amos Beeves makes David less certain that “some big unhappiness” is going to happen to him. Waiting for the other shoe to drop may terrify David, but it seems hardly to bother Hester. With a wisdom that David seems to lack, she says “I have everything I want and if I didn’t I’d just go on enjoying what I did have.” Unconvinced, David says, “People get what they deserve inside.” When JB then asks him why he has no children if there is such cause and effect, David grows angry and says, “There must be a good reason.” “Otherwise anything can happen at any time and you’d have to just bow your head and say amen it was right that it happened,” he hollers at JB, “That can’t be, there would be no use living.”

Perhaps the most interesting part of the play now takes place when Gus is drawn into the conversation and contests David’s belief that some larger scheme of justice provides a reason for everything that happens. They engage in an argument about

fate, justice and inertia. This results in David's admitting that it was Gus who fixed the car that launched his career. "It's time somebody knew what I am," David bellows, "I know what I know and it ain't much." Unable to understand why Gus' business failed while David's prospered even though Gus is a better mechanic, David says, "There has got to be a reason for these things that a man can wrap his hands around and control." This scene is remarkably similar to the Chris Keller, Joe Keller and George Deever scene in *All My Sons*. In that play Chris Keller cannot live with his good fortune because he is deeply suspicious that at some level he has done nothing to deserve it. What of course finally presents itself is the "secret" that Chris is suppressing; namely, his realization that his father is guilty of the crimes he has denied.

Finally, the baseball scout arrives (only after David admits that he made numerous calls to the Tigers and badgered the scout to come watch Amos pitch). In a beautifully written scene, Augie tells Amos that all the work his father had him do in the basement is the very thing that has ruined his chances to be signed. In a style very similar to Willy Loman, explaining how he raised his boys to his brother, Ben, a devastated Patterson attempts to justify his training of Amos. The single-minded focus on the target has made Amos ineffective with runners on base. "But, he has no life, he doesn't know how to do anything else," Patterson bleats, to which Augie replies, "I guess that was another mistake." Angry and disillusioned with his father, Amos screams the very same invectives that Biff uses when he discovers his father

with another woman. “You liar, I’ll kill you, you little fake,” Amos says, “leave me alone, just leave me alone.”

David now sees his chance to resolve his own anguish and comfort Amos at the same time. “You can’t lay down, it will kill him,” he tells Amos, “You’ve got to lay your hands on the mistake and twist it until it’s right again.” “Who gets what he wants in this world,” David pleads, “look in the corners of everything I own and find me my children.” “Where are my children and what good is everything without them?”

David says to a sobbing Amos. Just when David is taking comfort in being able to share disappointment with another human being, Hester tells him that she is pregnant. “Nobody escapes, except you,” Amos berates David.

Assaulted with yet another “undeserved” piece of good luck, David determines to force the hand of destiny once and for all. As Act Two closes, David signs over majority interest (60%) in everything he owns to Gus, leaving only the managing of the mink to determine his future. Determined to make his own destiny, he tells Gus, “If they live it’s my doin, and if they die, I’ll know for sure.” When Gus asks what it is he will know for sure if the mink die, David replies, “That nothing came to me because of what I am, what I myself am worth; and that everything can go smashing down the same way it came.” Miller’s notes at the end of the act that David “stands smiling questioningly, but with a new inner calm.”

Act three begins the next March with David and Hester arguing about how much time David is devoting to the animals and how little time he is spending with his new son. As the act progresses, it becomes clear that the birth of the child has resulted in neurotic behavior in David that takes the form of a deep (and unfounded) suspicion that he is losing money in his businesses run by Gus. This fixation on losing money began almost immediately after the birth of the child. "In twenty minutes after he saw the baby he was speaking of losses," Hester says to Gus "He doesn't sleep anymore and I see him walking the floor at night." Hester searches for the answer to "what has made him afraid," and she blames herself for "living with him every day and not knowing the answer."

The terrible answer to this question finally comes to Hester in the final scene of the play. She realizes that David has always been living in terror of the bad thing that will finally happen to him and was positive that the baby would be born dead. "The baby would die, it had to because he wanted it so much," she tells Gus, "and once it was dead everything else would be safe." "This was his curse," she finishes, "he would finally pay for happiness and then we'd be safe, don't you see?" When Gus expresses his disbelief, Hester replies that once the baby was born healthy, "He wasn't safe anymore, anything could still happen." "Again, he'd got what he wanted, he really had everything," she protests, "and the God or the devil he lives by hadn't been paid."

The culminating event in the play is the emergency phone call Hester receives telling her that poison feed has accidentally been sold to David. At the moment she receives

this call, David is feeding the mink and quick action might save at least some of the animals. Amazingly though, Hester contemplates not telling him. “Are you trying to destroy this man?” Gus says to her, “if these mink die then he will **know** he was never any good, that everything came to him only from his luck.” Hester calls David in from the barn and tells him of the poison, but blocks the door when he tries to rush out to stop the feeding. “They’ve got to die, Davey,” she demands, “I’m not going to have my son learn his words from a man who looks in all the corners of the dark for a devil that isn’t there.” “No matter what he comes to own,” she says, “he’ll never believe he has to pay for it with the life of his son. “She concludes this powerful speech by saying, “you wished him dead, Davey, and I know what made you wish it; and that what’s got to go, and tonight!!”

Moved by her resoluteness, David decides to let the mink die. He sits on the couch and squints and blinks as though coming alive after a long sleep. “We’ve got nothing, can you feel it?” he asks Hester, “I mean it’s **gone**.” She tells him, “I never wanted all those things,” and he is stunned to admit that neither did he. They both marvel at how lucky they are as they ascend the staircase admiring the baby that they now can love totally.

When I first read Miller’s comment that *The Man Who Had All The Luck* was a Depression play, I thought him quite mistaken in that evaluation.¹² The plot seemed oblivious to the economic realities of the 1930’s and the play was completely devoid of the themes that resonated in the Abe Simon trilogy or the other plays written

during his University of Michigan days. In analyzing the play carefully however, I now have come to view it as a Depression story in reverse. Abe Simon, Ben Simon, and Max Zibriski struggled to define themselves in the context of the social and economic disaster of the Depression. These characters were able to overcome the social and economic forces (which they had internalized and mistaken for their own convictions) that conspired to prevent them from making moral choices consistent with their true nature. It took the entire course of the play for these men to realize that their own sense of right and wrong had been defined by the internalization of social values that were in conflict with what they actually believed. Their “moral independence” was the result of a transformation of consciousness that constituted the central action of the play.

David Frieber has a similar transformation but from the opposite direction. In his case, he is struggling to define himself when everything in the world is going his way. Just as is the case with Abe Simon, he is trying to discover some standard of justice that will serve as an operating principle and explain why he prospers and other people (who actually deserve it more) do not. Abe Simon seeks some similar explanation for why his business should fail while those of people like Roth should prosper. In both cases, the result is anger, guilt and fear at what seems to be the injustice of the entire scheme of things. David cannot live with the guilt of what he fears is his unfair and unjust good fortune, and he is terrified that someday justice will prevail and he will be destroyed. If there is no explanation for his luck, then there will be no explanation for

his destruction. If indeed there are no laws that govern the destiny of an individual, then by what standards is he to define himself as a “good” and “ethical” man?

“The play is after all attacking the evaluation of people by their success or failure,” Miller said in 1989, “and worse yet, denying the efficacy of property as a shield against psychological catastrophe.”¹³ Abe Simon sought protection from “psychological catastrophe” by desperately clinging to his business because it was the only meaning he could assign to his existence. The radical suggestion here is that Abe Simon (and all other Abe Simons across America) brought on his own catastrophe by clinging to the very values that caused the disaster in the first place. David Frier also sought protection from “psychological catastrophe” first by trying to understand his success and then finally trying to “tempt fate” by causing himself to fail at something.

It was in understanding the nature of the psychological disaster feared by his characters that Arthur Miller reached the final stage in his development as a major playwright. This realization both lifted his plays beyond the confines of the 1930’s while at the same time making this decade an indelible part of his dramatic imagination. David Frier feared the same thing as Abe Simon namely, the terror of failure and lack of success. One had too little success and the other too much, but at heart both defined themselves by the same measuring stick. *The Man Who Had All The Luck* was the last play in which this lack of insight was overcome by the character during the course of the play. Joe Keller and Willy Loman also strove to

protect themselves from psychological disaster, but Joe realizes the truth only after destroying his family and poor Willy goes to his death clinging to the personal mythology that he could never discard.

For the first time, Arthur Miller had written a play that combined all of the elements of his personal and political experience into a dramatic context. This play echoes Miller's own Depression experiences with his family, it reflects the playwright's growing concern with fascism, and it also resonates with the disillusionment he was experiencing about the true nature of the war in Europe. It also exemplifies Miller's propensity to seek a larger philosophical meaning from the social and political events taking place. For Miller, the nation had ignored the meaning of the Depression and was engaged in a similar lack of understanding about the significance of the war. *The Man Who Had All The Luck* draws together these ideas into one story and in this way makes a thematic connection between Abe Simon, Montezuma and David Frier that finds its final expression in *All My Sons*.

The autobiographical dimensions of *The Man Who Had All The Luck* are rather obvious. Miller's own experiences in watching the demise of his father's business have been discussed in earlier chapters. It disgusted Miller that both his father thought himself a failure and (even more potently) that Miller struggled with these same feelings about his father. Miller concluded that his father understood the American Dream to be success (as opposed to freedom) and that this was a virtual moral imperative for a productive life. As Miller watched the Depression ruin the lives of

many people he knew, he pondered the arbitrary and seemingly random and meaningless nature of why some people survived and some didn't. As the war brought America out of economic stagnation and into prosperity, people seemed little interested in the introspection forced on them by the Depression. 14

But Miller was still posing the same basic questions in 1944 that he was in 1936.

There was no more logic in why Abe Simon's business failed and Sam Roth's prospered than there was in why Gustav Ebersson's repair shop faltered while David Frieber's flourished. Sam Roth and Shory would both agree that we are "jellyfish" and that, as Gus says, "there is no justice in the world." Miller is suggesting that affluence has in effect "let us off the hook" and that a reexamination of the nature of success has been abandoned. For Miller, the Depression exposed the fraudulence of a morality based on pecuniary values and provided an indispensable opportunity to redefine the meaning of our lives in more human terms. That is why David is no happier when he has "all the luck" than Abe Simon was when he had no luck at all. They both suffer from the same disease, and their metaphysical angst cannot be addressed without a more satisfactory definition of their existence.

The political title of this play might be *The Country With All the Luck* or perhaps, *The Country That Learned Absolutely Nothing*. Like David Frieber, America was in some ways badly served by prosperity. It allowed the nation the luxury of never really having to figure out the meaning of the Depression any more than it did the meaning of the subsequent prosperity. Miller seems to be saying that America, like David,

emerged unscathed from the 1930's and had "all the luck" of victory and economic success.

But the price of this "luck" became the subject of Miller's great body of work. The play implies that it was luck rather than a larger understanding of the meaning of the social injustices of the Depression era that freed the nation from any moral reckoning or fundamental resolution of the underlying problems exposed by the Depression.

Unlike David, America never "got it," and Miller saw this lack of insight as somehow ominous to a free people. For Miller, the unlearned lessons of the 1930's have been at the heart of social and political problems for the last five decades and thus are simply old themes dressed up in newer clothing. **15**

The Man Who Had All The Luck was for Miller the result of "a fear of drift into some kind of fascism and [it referred] to the paralysis of will in the democracies as Hitler moved week by week to the domination of all Europe."**16** It is this "paralysis of will" that Miller sees as the necessary ingredient for the fascist impulse to predominate in a society. In all of his plays after 1939, this moral inertia is a key ingredient in the dramatic action. Why did Montezuma (with infinitely greater resources) fail at the hands of Cortez? Was it not his illusion of powerlessness (rather than the strength of Cortez) that placed him in the hands of the conqueror? Was it not Mark Donegal's illusion of powerlessness that led to his cynicism and moral inertia in the face of fascist tyranny? Later in this chapter we will see that Lawrence Newman in Miller's novel, *Focus*, suffers from the same sense of powerlessness in the face of anti-

Semitism that results in his surrender to fascist behavior. As Christopher Bigsby suggests, “Miller was fascinated by those who refused to take their lives in their own hands for finally, a moral world requires the acknowledgment that we are the product of our actions.”¹⁷

If, as Shory suggests, we are jellyfish who go in and out with tide and “about what happens to us, a man has very little to say,” then it isn’t surprising that neither the Depression nor World War Two would be full of any moral significance. If however the opposite is true, as Miller asserts, and “we are the masters of our own destiny and must accept responsibility for who we are and what we become” then there must be a moral basis for the waging of war in Europe.¹⁸ “Walking through the city [New York] during the war, seeming to be part of nothing, no class, no influential group,” Miller said in *Timebends*, “the city seemed to implore some significance for the sacrifices in the papers every day.”¹⁹ Just as the characters in the play (other than David) weren’t the least bit interested in his quest for understanding the logic that connected effort to achievement, Americans seemed equally oblivious to their moral complicity in watching indifferently as the fascist powers prevailed in Europe. Miller is arguing that moral inertia in the face of economic injustice during the Depression led to moral inertia in dealing with fascism in Europe and finally resulted in the promotion of the fascism and injustice found Miller found in post-war America.

Yet in the end, the play was a commercial failure primarily because of Miller’s inability to subordinate theme to plot and character. “From the start of his career he

wished to enrich the realistic style with an evaluation of life,” says critic Leonard Moss, “but in *The Man Who Had All The Luck* he realized he had not been able to avoid a rhetorical, or discursive, presentation of his theme.”²⁰ This play marked the last of Miller’s “theme” plays in which the plot serves the meaning more than it reveals the character relationships and the story. The novel was the much better vehicle for direct expression of themes, and Miller concluded that with the next play he would forego any sentiments that did not arise naturally from the action. If he were to write another play, he would seek the “geometry of relationships and hold back any tendency to express an idea in itself unless it was literally forced out of a character’s mouth.”²¹ This discovery was the hardest lesson Miller was to learn about playwriting because it countered what he saw as the central purpose of the work of art. A play ought to be an assertion of meaning, Miller has often said, and it took him ten years of trying before he found the formula of allowing the quality of the relationships between the characters to express the meaning of the play. *The Man Who Had All the Luck* marked Miller’s last attempt to write a play in which the metaphor was more significant than the characters. Ultimately, if the audience does not respond emotionally to the human beings on the stage, the meaning of the action is irrelevant.

Although the tyranny of the dramatic metaphor kept *The Man Who Had All the Luck* from being a major play, it did expose how profoundly the war influenced Miller. The play is actually the story of Job in reverse and it sprang directly from Miller’s emotional reaction to both his inability to serve in the military and the disgust he felt

at the lack of any moral significance being assigned to the war on the home front. The same frustration is present in David Frieber when he struggles to find a way in which he can be sure that he is totally responsible for his own actions. "A moral world," declares Christopher Bigsby," requires the acknowledgement that we are the products of our actions."²² Bigsby goes on to suggest that Miller saw people who refused to take their lives into their own hands as those who "watched the European powers concede their destiny to a man whose assurances seemed to mesmerize those who confronted a power that increased with every success." Just as David Frieber refused to concede his humanity to the "tides" like Jellyfish, Arthur Miller refused to yield to what he saw as the inability to see "a larger purpose for the sacrifices that drenched the papers every day." "I was equipped with a lifelong anguish of self-blame that sometimes verged on a pathological sense of responsibility," Miller said in *Timebends*, "and it was probably inevitable that the selfishness, cheating, and economic rapacity on the home front should have cut into me with its contrast to the soldiers sacrifices and the holiness of the allied cause. I was a stretched string waiting to be plucked, waiting as it turned out for *All My Sons*." ²³

ENDNOTES

1. This is taken from the last page of Miller's unpublished 1939 version of the Abe Simon trilogy, *The Grass Still Grows*. See Chapter One footnotes.
2. Arthur Miller, *All My Sons* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1974), p.31.
The obvious insight here is that Miller (through Chris) is pondering whether the American people ever had any ideological commitment in the first place (even in the 1930's).
3. Arthur Miller, *Echoes Down the Corridor* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), p.35.
4. Christopher Bigsby, Ed, *Arthur Miller and Company* (London: Methuen Drama, 1990), p.44. The vast majority of these radio scripts are now lost but several remain in the Arthur Miller collection at the University of Texas. See Chapter One footnotes.
5. Barry D. Karl, *The Uneasy State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 196. Karl has an interesting discussion of the opposition to efforts related to fighting fascism. Particularly relevant is Lillian Hellman's play,

Watch on the Rhine that “exploits the problem of American response to Nazism without depicting a single clearly identifiable Nazi.”

6. Christopher Bigsby, Ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 43.
7. Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p 71. Miller’s portrayal of Donegal is strikingly similar to Rick in the film, *Casablanca*. Barry Karl in *The Uneasy State* (pp. 197-98) reinforces this comparison. “Rick epitomized the American dilemma on the eve of Pearl Harbor. Rick questions his responsibility to a world beset by demons willing enough to let him be... to run his saloon and simply watch them destroy others. He need not interfere... he can simply watch. It is his aroused moral sense, not a direct attack on his interests that leads him to make the decision to leave the safety of his neutrality behind the bar. As Rick, Bogart represents the isolated American, persuaded he has a duty to perform.”
8. *Timebends*, p. 71.
9. *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 44-45. There are three existing versions of this play, with the original residing at the University of Texas. Although the published version (in the UK only) is somewhat more polished and reflects the changes made during the brief production of the play, I have chosen to

examine the first script. For the purposes of this study, the original script reflects just the intentions of the author without the later adjustments made to improve the overall needs of the production. With one major exception (which will be noted) no significant thematic differences exist which alter the thrust of Miller's dramatic ideas.

10. *Timebends*, pp. 103-107. Miller largely confirms these ideas in his discussion of the play in *Timebends*. As if to confirm that Shory's speech was antithetical to everything David (and Miller) believes, Miller says: "Drama, if allowed to follow its premises may betray even its author's prejudices or blindness. A play's action, much like an individual's acts, is more revealing than its speeches, and this play, embodied a desperate quest on David's part for an authentication of his identity, a longing for a break in the cosmic silence that alone would bestow a faith in life itself."

11. Robert Martin, Ed, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p.73.

12. *Timebends*, p. 103.

13. Arthur Miller, *The Golden Years and The Man Who Had All the Luck* (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), p.6.

14. *Timebends*, pp. 112-13.

15. Robert Martin, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1978), pp 86-109. In the essay entitled, "1956 and All This" Miller articulates how the "unlearned lessons" of the 1930's have affected American culture and especially its foreign policy and standing in the world. The thrust of the article is that America failed to take out of the Depression experience that it must "revolutionize (our) entire attitude toward cultural matters, so that we are seen as a genuine civilization and not merely a collection of dominating inventions and bodily comforts." "If we are content to allow it [military and economic power] to appear in the hands of a people who make nothing of culture, who are content to appear solely as businessmen, technicians, and money-makers, we are handing to the Russians an advantage of regiments." He argues that "we have not learned how to be happy and at one with ourselves, we have only gone far in abolishing physical poverty, which is but one element in the solution. And by harping only on that [material achievements] we in effect declare a want of spirituality, a want of human feeling, a want of sympathy in the end."

16. *Timebends*, pp. 86-90.

17. *Cambridge Companion*, p. 46.

18. Arthur Miller, interview with Christopher Bigsby, 1995.

19. *Timebends*, p. 223.

20. Harold Bloom, Ed, *Modern Critical Views, Arthur Miller* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 83. Closing after four Broadway performances, *The Man Who Had All The Luck* nonetheless contained all the elements that would make *All My Sons* a hit play just three years later. It is important to note that the Broadway version of the play incorporated a major change that made it more similar to *All My Sons*. It suddenly occurred to Miller that Amos and David (who is now David Beeves) needed to be brothers. Miller had once again realized (as in the Simon plays) that the family was the best way for abstract social and political themes to be revealed in vital human relationships. An audience must be emotionally engaged by the strength and quality of human relationships before the significance of those relationships can be grasped. The intensity of David's moral wrangling has specific significance within the family and is more dramatically interesting by making Amos and David brothers.

21. Bloom, p. 83.

22. *Cambridge Companion*, p. 46.

23. *Timebends*, p. 223

CHAPTER SIX

THE LOGIC OF THE ILLOGICAL: NON-DRAMATIC WORK DURING THE WAR

During the war years Arthur Miller engaged in two work experiences that profoundly influenced his political outlook and the future direction of his dramatic writing. Ruled physically ineligible for military service, he instead volunteered for work at the Brooklyn Naval Yards in late 1941 and was employed there until early in 1943. At this point he was recommended to a Hollywood producer to make a screenplay of the Ernie Pyle collection of reports called, *Here Is Your War*. To gather material for this screenplay, Miller traveled “from Ft. Benning to Camp Campbell to half a dozen other training camps trying to understand soldiers and a war” from their own perspectives. Miller’s work on this project was eventually blended together with several other writers and became *The Story of GI Joe*. In 1944, Miller wrote his own version of these interviews in the book, *Situation Normal*.¹

The two experiences resulted in a combination of insight and disillusion that served as an important maturing process for the young artist. Working in the Brooklyn shipyards exposed Miller to virulent anti-Semitism from which he had been largely sheltered before 1941. This ethnic hatred also manifested itself in the Brooklyn neighborhood where Miller lived as he witnessed increasing activity of anti-Semitic and anti-black groups.² The hundreds of interviews Miller conducted with servicemen also proved to be disillusioning. “I kept searching for some ideological conception animating them,” Miller said in *Timebends*, “but the war was about little more than what a game of football is about...something that had to be won for pride’s sake.”³ The emotional impact of these experiences formed the groundwork for his 1945 novel, *Focus*.

Focus is the story of Lawrence Newman, personnel manager for a large corporation in New York City. His job is to hire the secretaries and clerks who sit in long rows of desks outside his office. The novel is set in the present, 1944-45. The city is filled with anxiety about the impact of the war ending. Despite the nearly unanimous conviction that the country will lapse back into Depression when the returning servicemen overwhelm the job market, Newman takes great pleasure in the security of his position. He maintained his job throughout the 1930's by sticking to the company line and making himself indispensable to his superiors.

The "company line," it turns out, includes not only loyalty, but also adherence to an unspoken commitment to avoid hiring Jews and other undesirable people. "We just aren't set up to take that kind of person," his boss tells him. "The wrong kind is liable to take up out of here and make some kind of story for the newspapers." The manner in which Newman both accepts and condones this attitude constitutes the early part of the novel. By the second chapter the familiar pattern, in which Miller's main character undergoes a transformation of consciousness, is evident. In this case, the beginning of the novel finds Lawrence Newman as embedded in his false values as Abe Simon and Karl Mannheim are in theirs. By the end of the novel, he will have experienced an emotional and intellectual transformation as potent as the one that occurred to the clothing manufacturer or the prison psychiatrist.

Implicit in the evolution of Newman's outlook is a statement about the society that nurtured these false values in the first place. Newman is portrayed as a man whose "focus" on his personal well being and the need to maintain excellent community relations results in his unconscious internalization of widely held social prejudices. Indeed, these prejudices are actually a source of bonding with his neighbors, who resent the intrusion of Jews and "others" into their community. Miller has a particular genius for uncovering how bias and false values are often disguised as social attributes. Newman relishes his sense of "belonging" to a community, and his internal dialogue is a process of reinforcing his own self-image by convincing himself that he is superior to Jews. "Then as now he could not think of them without a sense of power and self-purification," he thought, " Listening to reports of their avarice insensibly brought him closer to an appreciation of his own liberality, which seemed proven by the simple fact that he was not a Jew." So, anti-Semitism was a function of Newman's own positive self-identification in the same way Abe Simon's worship of the wealthy was a part of his own self-concept.

The secure world of Lawrence Newman began to fall apart when he purchased a pair of glasses to fortify his failing eyesight. What became gradually apparent to him was that these glasses created the certain knowledge in other people that he was himself a Jew. Newman's entire existence began to be altered. "In the mirror of the bathroom, he had used for nearly seven years, he was looking at what might be very properly called the face of a Jew." Given the extent, to which Miller draws from his own experience to craft his plots, it is an interesting to speculate on the metaphorical

nature of Newman's glasses. For the first time Newman is confronted with the reality of his Jewish identity and he will soon begin to see the world from a new perspective. Miller's biography serves to confirm the idea that the wartime years resulted in a full appreciation of the playwright's own sense of being Jewish.⁴

The speculation that Newman is actually crafted from Miller's own experience is supported in *Timebends* in the description of how Miller crafted his characters. "I could not be Dickens, his head surrounded with portraits of characters miraculously sprung from it," Miller said, "The artist must commit himself and stand still for a self-portrait."⁵ That self-portrait is of a man confronting the blinding insights that he suddenly feels when he observes the world in a new way. For Newman, who is a non-Jew, thought to be Jewish, and thus is forced to see the world differently, the world suddenly treats him in a new way, and this treatment disrupts his value system. For Miller the changing perspective was more gradual but equally profound. The anti-Semitism Miller confronted in 1934 was "not given the name of discrimination and was merely [in his mind] the natural order of things."⁶ But like the Lawrence Newman that we encounter at the beginning of *Focus*, the Arthur Miller of 1934 had yet to encounter the transformational experiences that altered his sense "of the natural order of things."

Indeed, the natural order of things for Mr. Newman turns upside down the moment the world begins to perceive him as a Jew. When he fails to hire an attractive woman (whom in a later chapter he marries) she lashes out at what she assumes is his Jewish

nature and screams, “ You know what they ought to do with people like you, they ought to hang you.” This outburst sends Newman into a metaphysical rage as he desperately searches for the reasons why he could never be a Jew. The more he struggles, the more obvious it is that the woman has put her finger on the thing that Newman most fears. I am irresistibly tempted to find, in Newman’s torment, signs of the author, struggling with the denial of his own ethnicity. Just as Newman fears that being Jewish will exclude him from everything he loves, Miller quite possibly senses that his “Jewishness” has been the victim of his frantic sense of “belonging to America.” They are both beginning to discover that the world to which they so wished to belong doesn’t want them.

Newman resigns his job when he is moved to an inferior position because in the words of his boss, “we don’t feel you’ll make the right impression on people who might come into the office for the first time.” He begins a long search for employment, where Newman encounters subtle forms of prejudice resulting from his Jewish appearance. Newman almost frantically declares himself a gentile, as he tries to prove to people that he is not a Jew. The perfect opportunity for proving “what kind he is” comes by seeking the friendship and support of his neighbor, Fred. It is gradually revealed that Fred is a high official in an organization called “the Christian Front.”

The objectives of the front are to unify the community against the Jewish residents and make life so miserable for them that they will leave. “When the boys come home

they're going to look for an organization that gives them what they want," Fred explains to Newman "They ain't standing for a lotta kikes takin up all the jobs and businesses." Newman fights off his deep revulsion for the sheer stupidity of this and accepts the offer to join the "Front." The wrath of the front is primarily focused on Mr. Finkelstein, the Jewish owner of a neighborhood candy and newspaper store. One Sunday morning, vendors appear across the street from the store and begin to sell newspapers in competition with Mr. Finkelstein. " Paper, Buy American!!" the vendors shout at Newman as he approaches the store. Newman is torn by indecision, but finally buys a paper from the vendors and refuses to look at Finkelstein as he returns down the street to his house.

Despite having purchased the paper from the vendors, Newman is unable to join the men in the anti-Semitic rhetoric they are using to describe the presence of Finkelstein (and even more his bearded father, wearing a yarmulke) in their neighborhood.

Newman wants desperately to be accepted by his neighbors and tries various ways to convince himself that he too is "filled with prideful indignation at the penny-pinching Jews." With this new assertion of his gentile identity, Newman enters on an aggressive job search only to meet with further frustration and rejection. Rejected by a firm for which he was perfectly suited, Newman wonders, " Is it possible that they looked at me and thought me untrustworthy or grasping or loud because of my face?" What could he do, he asked himself to convince people he was still Lawrence Newman? "He was him, a human being with a certain definite history," he told

himself, “ and they are looking at me as though I were guilty of something, as though I would hurt them.”

Finally, Newman gets a job with a Jewish company and begins the relationship with the woman who becomes his wife. They both “suffer” from the same problem in that they are gentiles who appear Jewish and face subtle discrimination. Newman’s wife, it turns out, has a long history of virulent anti-Semitism in her past, including membership in the California branch of the Christian Front. A devotee of Father Coughlin, Mrs. Newman inflames her husband’s desire to prove to his neighbors that he is “the right type.” Yet, certain members of “the Front” have determined that Newman is a Jew and ominous warnings are given to both Newman and Finkelstein that they had better leave the neighborhood.

These threats inevitably force a certain relationship between Newman and Finkelstein based on the fact that their property is being vandalized at night, and each has received other “dark warnings. “Newman is a Jewish name, isn’t it?” Finkelstein asks him with a certain relish. These moments of fun and a sense of their common dilemma appeal to Newman’s basic sense of fairness, and Newman begins to see Finkelstein, not just as a Jew, but as a friend. This is completely unacceptable to Newman’s wife, who is pushing him to join the Christian Brotherhood. Once again, a Miller character is in the familiar place of being confronted with a moral decision. On the one hand, Newman is drawn to Finkelstein, and his inner impulses tell him that he is more of a kindred spirit than his gentile neighbors. Yet at the same time, Newman’s

entire self-concept relies on the goodwill of those living near him and the approval and love of his wife.

The major event that forces Newman to act is the rejection of his wife and him at a vacation hotel. Although Newman had been to the hotel before, he had never noticed the sign that read, “restricted clientele.” Clearly, “it wasn’t there five years ago,” he tells his wife as they are forced to admit that they are classified as Jews and thus undesirable. His wife’s reaction to this snub is violent. “Why don’t they take everybody and find out who’s who and put the damn kikes off to themselves and settle it once and for all?” she says, “Why do you always let them make a Jew out of you?” This statement forces the first major crack in Newman’s armor of denial. He realizes that “to her it was simply a matter of straightening out their identities, and then they could go and enjoy the hotel for a weekend.” He couldn’t find a way of telling her that he could never be at peace with himself if he were to “try to convince a hotel man or anyone else that they were Gentiles.” He struggled to define a new feeling inside him that caused him to see that “it would be like begging, like being admitted on trial to have to be showing what a nice [Gentile] fellow he really was.”

This new feeling forces a confrontation with his wife over her increasing demands to prove to the neighborhood and the Christian Front that they are Gentiles. “They’re drawing a ring around us,” she tells her husband while urging him to attend an important “Front” event, “You’ll break out now or never get out.” She then articulates to him the precise reasons why she so hates and fears the influence of the Jews. In a

speech worthy of Father Coughlin, she tells him that she, “ has never seen the Jew hate that there is in New York.” “Once all these organizations get together and join up into one outfit,” she tells him, “ they’re going to have enough people to swing this country.” When he asks why, she lays out a scenario in which Jews will be victimized soon after the war. “You know as well as me that everybody has no use for the Jews,” she argues, “ a depression comes along, and you know its coming and an organization [will be popular if it] can get them going and it’s the end of the Hebrews.” “When that happens, you want to be on the right side,” she badgers him, “ So, you’re going to that meeting, you hear?”

The final transformation of Lawrence Newman begins with his attendance at the Christian Front rally. In a hall overflowing with American flags, Newman listens to the fiery speech of a Boston priest, who is the keynote speaker. Walking the halls are stern looking men who watch the audience for members of the “internationalist press.” “You can always tell an internationalist from a nationalist,” the priest says, as he lists the enemies of America to an adoring audience. Furthermore, the priest passionately proclaims the Jews are responsible for a war that has “taken our brothers, husbands and friends.” Because Newman seems to be less enthusiastic than the people around him are, he is suspected of being a Jew, and thugs throw him into the street.

Walking back to his house, he encounters Finkelstein, and in a long section of the novel, Finkelstein confronts him about the nature of prejudice by relating Newman’s

bias specifically to Finkelstein himself. The storeowner admits his own inclinations to make general assumptions about blacks based on a single unpleasant encounter. "I say to myself, how many colored people do I know?" he tells Newman, "Better I should be saying, this colored person and that one I don't like, because the whole people I don't know." "What do you see when you look at me that makes you so mad?" he asks Newman. Newman is forced to admit "he had hated him because he had in him the propensity to act as Jews were *supposed to*, cheating, dirty, loud." To his astonishment, he realized that he had feared Finkelstein "because he had the face of a man who *should* be acting in an abhorrent way."

The novel ends when thugs associated with the Christian Front beat up Newman and Finkelstein. Upon his arrival at the police station to report the assault, Newman is asked how many Jews live in the neighborhood. "There are the Finkelstein's on the corner," he tells the policeman, "just them and myself." The novel ends with Newman's reflection on how "he longed deeply for a swift charge of lightning that would break away the categories of people and change them so that it would not be important what tribe they sprang from." "It must not be important any more, he swore, " even though in his life it had been of the highest importance."

Despite the importance of anti-Semitism to the plot of *Focus*, it is not the "focus" of this novel, anymore than the Depression is the focus of the Abe Simon trilogy. Rather, it is the public issue that forces the major character into a moral decision that defines his humanity. The significance of *The Crucible*, for example, is not its comment on the Salem hysteria; instead, the witch trials represent the social forces

against which certain individuals are compelled to act. Characteristic of Miller is the dramatic instinct of forcing his characters against the wall and seeing what they will do. Abe Simon, Joe Keller, Willy Loman, John Proctor, Karl Mannheim, Max Zibriski and Lawrence Newman are all men who finally acknowledge that they can no longer avoid a commitment to moral action. In each of these cases, Miller's dramatic focus, and the political implications drawn from this focus, is on the subjective process by which his characters determine that they can no longer accept the prevailing social situation.

In the course of this reorientation of the character's perspective, the society in which he lives must be presented as both a force that prevents his spiritual development and a reflection of his own thinking. Lawrence Newman is not simply a victim of the prevailing climate of anti-Semitism and political reaction found in *Focus*. Nor is Lawrence Newman created as a literary device to give Miller the opportunity to brand America as reactionary and anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitism and political reaction are the very things that Newman espouses and desires in the beginning of the novel. Abe Simon and Joe Keller are the strongest proponents of the business ethics that they will later reject. Max Zibriski and Karl Mannheim enthusiastically embrace perspectives on industry and the prison system that they later will give their lives to oppose. Similarly, Newman is a man who has internalized the social value system so completely that he cannot differentiate social values from personal convictions. Thus he is "society" as much as he is a victim of that society.

At the very core of *Focus* is the disillusion and despair Miller felt about the "society" in which Lawrence Newman lived "Some part of the genesis of this novel *Focus*,"

Miller said in a 1984 essay, “must lie in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.” Miller wondered himself whether it was his “Hitler-begotten sensitivity” or the anti-Semitism itself that made him fear that when peace came America would be launched into “a raw politics of race and religion.” Miller sensed even at the time that the actual hostility to Jews shown by many of the workers was exacerbated in his own mind by his fear of Hitler.

Yet what troubled the young playwright even more was “the absence among the men I worked with of any comprehension of what Nazism meant.” “We were fighting Germany essentially because she had allied herself with the Japanese,” he said in the essay, “and moreover, we had been maneuvered into this war by powerful Jews who secretly controlled the federal government.” This sense in Miller that there existed no national unity around the war created a sense of emergency that prompted him to write *Focus*. “As far as I knew, anti-Semitism in America was a closed if not forbidden topic of fiction,” Miller said, “let alone the existence within the Catholic priesthood of certain militants whose duty and pleasure it was to stoke up Jew-hate.”⁷ For Miller, the war in Europe made it impossible for people to continue harboring private grievances against Jews at home without public consequences. The public consequence of anti-Semitism is the real subject matter in the seemingly private story of Lawrence Newman in the novel. Thus, *Focus* was a view of anti-Semitism that was at once deeply personal, social and political.

Focus was also the product of Miller's numerous conversations with soldiers contained in his book, *Situation Normal*. Just as Lawrence Newman seems to have little ability to see the public consequences of his private behavior, so did many soldiers and sailors have the same inability to put the war in any larger philosophical perspective. Miller's book concludes with an essay called, "Belief in America," in which Miller tried to find some basic understanding in the men why they had to go through their battle.⁸ Actually Miller found a whole series of (mostly irrelevant) reasons why the young men had confidence in their leaders and determination to do their duty. What concerned Miller was the shock that many soldiers would face when they compared the connection and sense of common purpose with their comrades in war with the America they would face when they returned.

In one particular chapter of *Situation Normal*, Miller focused on an individual soldier named Watson and the dilemma he faced in returning home. Miller knew full well, from working in the shipyards, the difficulties Watson would have harmonizing his old life with his Army experience. Many hundreds of thousands of "Watson's," Miller wrote, shared his feelings of love and identity with their comrades and units and in differing degrees would be required to transfer that love to civilian "units" at home. But to Watson (as typical of all soldiers) home means a town or a city "cut into a thousand disjointed pieces, each one an exclusive class in itself." Watson returning home finds no common goal at all and instead finds every group in town excluding the proximate group. "It is rich and poor again, it is white and black again, it is Jew and Gentile again," Miller writes, "it is above all, a mass of little groups each of

whose apparent goals in life conflict with the goals of the next group.” Watson, like Lawrence Newman in *Focus*, must now live unto himself, for his own selfish welfare. Watson must return to his group and “assume its little prejudices, its hates, its tiny aims” and forget the exhilaration he once got from the knowledge he was helping an enormous mass of men toward a great and worthy goal. “Half of him in a sense must die, and with it must pass away half the thrill he knew in being alive,” Miller says “he must, in short, become a civilian again.”

The tour of Army camps convinced Miller that anti-Semitism was simply one form of “aloneness” and lack of larger purpose that existed in the soldiers. The experience of being together in one unit and fighting for a larger purpose broke down this lack of connection, and Miller wondered in his writing what would happen to soldiers when they returned home. “Watson if he has the average social connections which are slight, is going to wander around his American town and find himself severely lonely,” Miller writes, “America to him is not moving in any direction, his life is standing still and he is alone and dissatisfied.” Watson returned to a people without scars and without any commonly held understanding of why he went to war and what he accomplished in going. “The only means by which Watson can rejoin himself with America,” Miller argues, “is by sharing with civilian America a well-understood Belief [he capitalized the word] in the rightness, the justness, the necessity of the fight.”

This Belief, Miller asserts, recurs more times in our ordinary conversation and in the historical conversations of our national tradition than any other words. They are “not the words free-enterprise or keep America the same,” he says, “but simply, that we believe all men are equal.” Watson, whether he can articulate it or not, believes that everything will rot and decline and go backwards if America is forced to live under laws that hold certain nations and peoples to be inferior and without rights. “Once our right to be equal is assured,” Miller says, “we will want nothing better than to see every nation on our level.” Miller’s experiences in the shipyards and in interviewing these troops left him frustrated at the disinclination of so many people to grasp this essential American belief. “If the implications of all men are equal were drilled into our people, in the Army and out,” Miller states, “with at least the assiduousness that the brand names of certain toothpastes are, we would have many fewer Watson’s with us now.” Further, this belief is the one idea that Hitler denies most completely, as he demands that the world be fixed into a pattern of inequality man against man.

Watson, like Lawrence Newman in *Focus*, struggles with the feeling that he is cut off from his fellow man, “a man alone with a lonely man’s fears, [who] must live only his little life, and do his unimportant things.” The war experience provided Watson with a brief moment of what it meant to experience common unity among men as a united part of the race. “Belief is not a bullet, Belief is a shield, Miller concludes, “when will we start the mills that roll such armament, and who will wither away because he went and returned, unarmed?” This was the sense of emergency that Miller felt in 1944 that compelled him to write *Focus*. It does seem true that Miller

wrote *Focus* out of the emergency of the moment. Characteristically he wrote it as a response to that emergency rather than a description of it.

“The difficulty of understanding human illusion,” Miller says in *Timebends*, “is the difficulty of discovering its premises, the logic of the illogical.” ⁹ In many interesting ways, *Focus* is the first of Miller’s fully mature works because it explores the logical basis of the irrational passions of the native fascism and anti-Semitism that Miller found in New York during the War. ¹⁰ Discovering the logic of the illogical and giving it artistic life is what Miller meant when in *Timebends* he describes himself as occupying “the psychological role of mediator between the Jews and America and among Americans themselves as well.” Miller had not lost his Popular Front sympathies or its universalizing tendencies, but rather they had transformed from the moral certainty of championing socialism over a corrupt capitalism (the system itself) to a condemnation of moral inertia in the face of fascism (of the kind displayed by the Christian Front in *Focus*) and the irrational and unjust aspects of the economic system.

Miller is arguing that as a Jew he was in a unique position to confront America with its own dark propensities and in that he was providing something antiseptic to the destructive forces of native fascism. By taking moral objection to the prevailing order, Miller was continuing with his identity as a radical critic of the nation. But by focusing his critique not on the system itself, but on the illumination of the logic of those who are the victims of that system, he fulfills a moral and artistic function

rather than a political one. Miller's self-proclaimed identity as a mediator between the Jews and America was "no doubt a defense against the immensity of the domestic and European fascistic threat, which in my depths I interpreted as the threat of my own extinction."¹¹

When I first read Miller's claim that he was a mediator between the Jews and America, I dismissed it as specious. I think now, however, that I misunderstood what Miller was saying. He was speaking from an artistic and not a political viewpoint when he made this assertion. What he is inferring, in my view, is that he is most interested in uncovering what is hidden in the psyche of his characters when they are placed in certain situations. He is in effect using his plays to reveal the hidden secret that exposes the truth of their natures. He sees himself as a mediator because he sees art itself as mediation between the particular and the universal. "I had the wish, if not the conviction," he said, "that art could express the universality of human beings, their emotions and ideas."¹² For Miller to have relevance in the larger world, he would use the particular insights that he felt being Jewish brought him and make these meaningful to the larger world. If Miller is to be called a "Jewish" writer in any sense, it is because he sees his ethnicity as giving him a unique calling. The first full realization of this artistic mission was demonstrated in *Focus*, and it has remained his primary artistic identity to the present day.

Thus as World War Two came to an end, Miller was poised to write the drama that was to launch him on a long and distinguished career as an internationally acclaimed

playwright. *All My Sons* resonated with many of the themes and situations that Miller developed in his earlier works. He returned to the formula of the Abe Simon plays by writing a story of a father and two sons and the business that both united them and tore them apart. He crafted a play in which the story of the characters lives had a metaphorical significance similar to those in *The Golden Years* and *The Man Who Had All The Luck*. He created a play that pointed a finger at his central anxiety of the wartime years namely, the existence of a subtle but powerful form of American fascism. And above all, Miller wrote a play in which the ethical dilemma of the major characters resulted from their denial of what Miller felt was the central lesion of the Depression years. The lesson was that we are a fundamental community of mutually dependent individuals and any ideology or national mythology that denies this, leads people to unhappiness and lack of personal meaning. Miller was about to write his first play that truly sought to dramatize “the logic of the illogical.” It was the production of *All My Sons*, in 1947 that established Arthur Miller as one of America’s foremost dramatists.

ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), pp. 276-277.
2. See Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest* (New York: Random House, 1983) Donald Warren, *Radio Priest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) and Ronald Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
3. *Timebends*, p. 277.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
7. Arthur Miller, *Echoes Down the Corridor* (New York: Viking Penguin 2000), p. 35.
8. Arthur Miller, *Situation Normal* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944). Also see *Echoes Down the Corridor*, pp. 31-37.

9. *Timebends*, p. 8.

10. Just as Arthur Miller was moving back to New York in the winter of 1939, Father Charles Coughlin used his radio addresses to urge "good Christians to take action, to organize into platoons in order to resist the forces of communist subversion in their midst." At the same time, FDR confided to Joseph Kennedy that, "if there was a demagogue around here the type of Huey Long to take up anti-Semitism, there could be more blood running in the streets of New York than Berlin." At the first meeting of the Christian Front, a customs official told members that Jews were "pouring into the US from every direction and that 'there is only one thing to do and that is to kill all the Jews.'"

These feelings must have been intensified by the fact that the Christian Front made New York City its primary target. In a 1939 diary entry, Harold Ickes said that Henry Ford and other rich people are helping to finance Father Coughlin who is making a particular drive on New York City. Only months after moving back to New York, Miller witnessed the formation of the Committee of American Patriots who gathered to picket radio station WMCA that refused to broadcast Coughlin's speeches. Street brawls involving Christian Fronters and Jews became frequent in New York as the distinction between anti-Communism and anti-Semitism seemed to disappear. A scene from *Focus* depicts an event that occurred countless times as fights broke out between sellers of *Daily Worker*, *Nation* and *Social Justice*

magazines. In an editorial published in *Nation* James Wechsler declared, “ the city has become a laboratory for carefully developed fascist experimentation, nourished by the heterogeneous character of its population and by the timidity of press and public officials.” As Miller was writing *The Golden Years*, anti-Semitism, anti-FDR, anti-New Deal and isolationist sentiments combined to provide a poisonous political atmosphere.

Two other actual New York City events in 1939 and 1940 find their way into fictionalized scenes in *Focus*. The large political rally featuring a speech by a “Boston priest” from which Lawrence Newman is expelled closely parallels two major New York City events. In private conversation, Miller has made reference to both these rallies as “shocking to him” and these feelings are clearly responsible for the clarity and emotional power of the scenes written into *Focus*. Soon after Miller returned to New York in 1939, the German-American Bund held a massive rally at Madison Square Garden billed, as a George Washington’s Birthday celebration. The rhetoric of this event is the very same as the rally in Miller’s novel. “A mass demonstration for true Americanism” the event was called and speaker after speaker condemned various un-American “isms” and in particular, “Communism and Jewish internationalism.”

The rally was particularly noted for the huge picture of George Washington that hung next to black swastikas in the hall. In a famous *Life* magazine photo spread, a Jewish plumber, Isador Greenbaum tried to rush the speaker’s podium as Bund

leader, Fritz Kuhn read his anti-Semitic litany to the cheering throng. The pictures of brown shirted Bund members beating Greenbaum are very similar to the scene where Newman's is physically removed from the hall in *Focus*. Bund officials quickly removed the syndicated columnist, Dorothy Thompson from the rally when she was caught laughing by monitors moving throughout the hall. Similar monitors are moving through the halls in the rally attended by Lawrence Newman and when he is caught not applauding and cheering the rhetoric, he is physically removed from the rally.

The point here is that it is not Nazism that Miller is writing about as much as it is "Americanism." The enemies of the common people, according to the rhetoric of Charles Coughlin and other "true Americans" were a political elite and alien minorities that were intent on betraying the nation. It was the need to protect the nation from these enemies that caused Charles Coughlin to call for the creation of the Christian Front. As I have said, Miller gives the Christian Front a powerful role in the transformation of Lawrence Newman in *Focus* and thus it is beyond speculation that Miller was deeply alarmed by this organization. The local groups of the Front were formed from the ranks of Coughlin's Social Justice Study Clubs, which were established in 1936. In *Focus*, young thugs who have been organized into gangs by the Christian Front harass Newman. Miller obviously was drawing from actual experience in his Brooklyn neighborhood when he wrote this portion of the novel. Indeed, Coughlin urged his followers to "form neighborhood platoons to protect themselves against a powerful enemy force, composed largely of Jewish

Communists that was threatening the nation's survival." These formations match exactly the same activity in *Focus*, in which the Front approaches Newman to join to protect the neighborhood against Jews and blacks.

The subversive nature of the Front in Miller's novel is also taken directly from the author's experience living in Brooklyn. Newman's next-door neighbor, Fred, introduces him to a national network of people who are plotting to rid America of its "enemies." The "plans" that Fred articulates to Newman closely resemble those of an actual event that took place in Brooklyn on January 13, 1940. On that day, FBI director Hoover led a group of agents on a raid that arrested eighteen members of the Brooklyn branch of the Christian Front. Seized were homemade bombs, rifles, ammunition and an elaborate plan to bomb public buildings and murder key government officials.

The plan had as its purpose the initiation of a popular revolt that would destroy Jewish owned newspapers and stores and blow up various key installations in the New York City area. Gold was to be seized wherever it could be found, both senators from New York were to be assassinated and a campaign of terror would force the federal government to send in troops. With that accomplished, the public would be so outraged at the money being spent to protect Jews that they would rise up and overthrow the Roosevelt administration and destroy communism in America. Known as the trial of "the Brooklyn Boys" this event brought to national attention the unique character of homegrown American fascism. The group

proclaimed themselves, “pro-American, pro-Christian, anti-Communist **and anti-Nazi.**” In other words, these men (and indeed the entire Christian Front) had nothing philosophically in common with Nazism because this movement was also considered non-American. The single- minded goal was the protection of America by ridding the nation of its enemies.

11. *Timebends*, pp 82-83.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 70

CHAPTER SEVEN

FAME, DISILLUSION, AND ANGER

**MILLER'S THREE GREATEST
PLAYS**

Despite the commercial success of *Focus*, Miller had still not fully recovered from the pain over the critical rejection of *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. Happily, the next play was *All My Sons* and the thought of discarding playwriting for another career ended when he received significant public acclaim. The New York Drama Critics passed over such works as Eugene O'Neill's, *The Iceman Cometh* to award Miller the Circle Award for 1947. The production ran for 328 performances and Miller later sold the script to Hollywood where Burt Lancaster and Edward G. Robinson starred in the film version.

Here I examine *All My Sons* as well as Miller's next two plays, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* with the purpose of reinterpreting them in the light of the ideas developed in previous chapters. The plays serve as the culmination of an artistic, intellectual and political process in which Miller used his talent to incorporate and develop the richness of his life experience into great works of art. This analysis also reveals that Miller clearly belongs to a specific historical period and that his masterpieces are essentially mature and sophisticated expressions of basic themes that were developed in his earlier works.

But this study is not only an attempt to define Miller's place in American intellectual history, but also to provide insights that might potentially change the way theatre artists interpret and stage his plays. Although some of this reinterpretation is subtle, in

each play I am suggesting that a more thorough understanding of Miller and his intellectual and political perspective might well prompt important thematic and artistic reconsideration of his plays. Prior to engaging in this study, I had directed seven productions of Miller's plays, and I recognized my own simplistic and partially developed understanding of Miller's politics and aesthetic assumptions resulted in unrealized productions and one-dimensional characterizations.

The story of *All My Sons* focuses on Joe Keller and his partner who ran a business that was converted during World War Two to the production of aircraft engines. At the peak of the War, the plant sent out defective parts that caused the deaths of twenty-one American fliers and the two men were tried for the crime. At the trial, Joe denied his partner's claim that he ordered the defective parts shipped and Joe was acquitted while his partner was sent away to jail. Joe gradually overcame the suspicions of his neighbors and rebuilt his business and reentered social life.

The play takes place three years after the incident. Joe's eldest son Larry is a pilot who has been reported missing and presumed dead. The family has waited for almost three years in vain for any word of the missing son. Now younger son Chris has returned from the fighting in Europe and rejoined the family business. As the play opens, he has fallen in love with his brother's former fiancée, Ann who is also the daughter of the jailed business partner. Mrs. Keller adamantly opposes the relationship because she irrationally refuses to accept Larry's death and because she

realizes that an acknowledgment of his demise would force her to admit her husband's guilt.

The action of the play is brought to a crescendo when Ann's brother George arrives (after visiting the father in jail) determined to confront Joe with the truth. Joe skillfully avoids an admission and Ann asks her brother to leave so that she can give herself to Chris and his family. This forces Kate Keller to communicate the awful truth (that his father did actually authorize the shipping of the defective parts) to Chris in a desperate attempt to prevent the marriage. Chris and his father then have a famous scene in which the son addresses the immorality and social irresponsibility necessary by his father, which permitted such a crime. The play ends with Ann producing a letter from Larry in which he tells of his impending suicide because of what his father has done. Left with no defense for his actions, Joe accepts responsibility for his crime and a connection to "all my sons" (and not just his own family). He shoots himself in the hope that this will clear the way for Chris to carry on the business for which Joe has devoted a lifetime to build.

For many critics, this play was, in Christopher Bigsby's words, essentially a product of the 1930's. With its emphasis on human brotherhood, its thematic innocence and dramatic simplicities, it resembled for Bigsby the moral certainties and confident principles of pre-war America.¹ Labeling it as a 1930's play suggests that Miller would write no more plays of this sort and that *All My Sons* can be seen as a relic of

the vanishing sensitivities of the Depression era. Yet, although the plot resonates with the feeling of an earlier age, the essential dramatic thrust of the play is not significantly different from most of his future (and past) works. This is because the play at its core is an expression of Miller's moral radicalism that has marked his work from the beginning.

This radicalism takes the form of a profound challenge to the prevailing morality operating in the world of the characters. *All My Sons* (and others to follow) contains the confident and optimistic assertion (also characteristic of the Popular Front period) that art should examine public and private behavior and suggest meaning behind social experience. When Miller says that theatre can expose a hidden process in human social experience he is arguing for the radical action of dissecting the means by which we come to believe what is right and what is wrong. Implicit in that process is that what most people think is right and good is the very source of their unhappiness and feelings of alienation. The radicalism of *All My Sons* and most of Miller's plays to follow is not the political simplicities of the 1930's, but the assault on the moral basis of American society characteristic of the intellectual energy of the Popular Front.

This assault on the ideals championed by the American system can best be seen by answering the question, "why does Joe Keller take his own life?" Indeed, the same question can be asked about Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, and Eddy Carbone in *A View From the Bridge*, with the answer revealing

both the major dramatic action and the thrust of Miller's political content. Joe Keller commits suicide because he has undergone a moral and spiritual transformation that has resulted in the realization that he has committed an unforgivable crime. But why does it take Joe so long to admit to what should be self-evident? How could he have deceived himself for so long?

The answer to this question is the key to Miller's message in this play. Joe's crime is different from many others only in degree. The play argues that the real crime was less the shipping of defective parts, than Joe's (and by implication the nation's) unquestioned belief in the basic social premise he conceptualized as the "business." Miller uses "business" as a metaphor for Joe's belief -system that caused him to subordinate everything else to the financial success of the firm. The shipping of defective parts was only the most extreme example of what was commonplace in a social environment where profit shaped moral choices. The Popular Front radical was arguing in this play that the selling of defective parts is symptomatic of a much larger problem.

The American social and economic values that Joe Keller has internalized are what really are defective in this story and understanding this makes an extraordinary difference in how this play is conceived and performed. Directors pay a very high price for their failure to understand Miller's political viewpoint when staging this play. The uninformed and simplistic interpretation of this work is that the playwright is using the story to attack capitalism in general and posit specific political positions

associated with Communism, Marxism or something vaguely “leftist.” Given this view, it is not surprising that Chris’ inability to articulate a new value system to replace the one he condemned in his father’s life is often seen as a primary shortcoming of the play. Yet, Miller is not advocating for any specific political or moral agenda in this play or any other of his works. Characteristic of his stance, his attack on American capitalism here focuses on the manner in which our economic system promotes the exclusion of any critical moral reflection regarding its ability to promote freedom and individual happiness. What is radical in this play is the assertion that Joe Keller has lived in a society where he never found the need to ask any larger questions about his life than whether his business could survive and be passed to his sons. When a moment of genuine moral choice takes place he is therefore completely unable to act in any but the most self-serving (and most antisocially disconnected) of ways.

It follows then that a common mistake in productions of this play lies in the characterizations of Joe and Chris Keller and springs from this inherent misunderstanding of Miller’s politics. Interpreting *All My Sons* as a political broadside (created for the purpose of advocating a specific political position) almost requires that Joe be portrayed as a man covering a dark secret who clings to half-truths in a desperate attempt to deny his culpability in the airplane parts scandal. This makes Joe Keller “guilty” from the first moment of the play and in effect forces the actor playing him to make denial the primary characteristic of Joe’s personality. But what Miller has actually done is create a man who has survived by celebrating certain

strongly held (constructive) values in order to avoid more troubling ones. In other words, the positive nature of Joe's personality is that he asserts very strong (and widely held) beliefs in a passionate and convincing way. In fact, these values are the bedrock of American society and are consistent with the views of most characters in the play and members of the audience.

It is critical for Miller's artistic purpose that the audience identify with the "correctness" of much of what Joe believes in order for his transformation to have any emotional or intellectual significance. In the words of author Steven Centola, Miller is pursuing a straightforward revelation of process, making clear the connections between past and present, between events and moral consequences, between the manifest and the hidden. **2** What is hidden and thus being exposed by Miller is the means by which a man could believe in (what he firmly believes are) "good things" and use those beliefs to do very bad things. By implication, the playwright is exposing the process by which our belief in things that we hold to be positive and morally good actually blinds us to more essential and life-sustaining values. *All My Sons* is not simply the story of how greed overtook the conscience of one man during wartime. It is instead an attempt to posit the events of that man's life as representative of a conflict of values in the larger society. Joe Keller's process of denial exposes a radical assertion that Miller is making namely, that as a society we are completely unaware that our economic values constrict our moral conscience. Miller's political broadside is the exposing of this paradox and not advocacy of any particular solution.

This is why it is so important that Joe be portrayed as a positive character and that his “side of the argument” be communicated with conviction. The audience can dismiss Joe’s actions if his behavior is reduced to his individual failings. Joe Keller has worked his entire career to give his children a better chance at life than he was given. Because he was put out on the street at ten years old, he has compensated by spoiling his entire family. “You wanted money, so I made money,” he tells his wife, “I could live on a quarter a day, but I got a family and nothing is bigger than the family.” When Chris expresses doubts about taking over the business because it doesn’t inspire him, Joe tries to get him to see that he has a responsibility larger than being personally inspired. “Don’t think like that, because what the hell did I work for,” he tells Chris, “that’s only for you, Chris, the whole shootin match is for you.” Joe Keller’s sense of his own worth and love for his children is expressed in his selfless struggle to build up a business for their benefit alone. Who could not argue that this brings purpose and meaning into Joe’s life and identifies him as a loving and giving parent?

Further, Joe’s values are widely shared by other characters in the play. Chris has returned from the War and experienced great discomfort at suddenly returning to the prosperity of the business. The experience of the communal feeling shared by soldiers willing to die for each other in pursuit of a larger goal has resulted in Chris feeling guilty about living the life of the heir to a thriving business. But Annie, reflecting the opinions of Joe tells him that he should feel joy about what his father has built for

him. "You have a right to everything you have, there's nothing wrong in your money," she tells Chris, "you should be proud, a man should be paid for that." When Chris has finally resolved to put away his doubts and accept the business, his father reacts in triumph. "I'm going to build you a house, stone, with a driveway from the road," he shouts, "I want you to use what I made for you, with joy Chris, without shame." It is absolutely essential for the play to assert its meaning, that Chris be played as a man who is desperately trying to find a way to enjoy the life his father has prepared for him. Chris must profoundly covet the things he later completely rejects because the real meaning of the play lies in his transformation and not his father's suicide.

The joy and passion with which Joe is able to give his life's work to his son is one of the most important aspects of the American dream and the validity of this perspective is critical to the success of the scenes that culminate the play. The eventual discovery of Joe's true actions forces the doubts with which Chris has struggled to rise to the surface and fuel his attack on his father's lack of morality. Miller's dramatic genius is evident in this final conflict where two equally potent and valid moral perspectives are set against each other. When Chris vilifies his father for his crime, Joe retorts with a powerfully true, albeit morally dubious, response. "Your stuff is no good, they close you up, they tear up your contracts," he exhorts Chris, "you lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes." "What could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away," he says, "it was a chance I took for you

Chris, I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you?"

It is not Chris's response to this speech that constitutes Miller's political statement in this play because the magnitude of the crime makes his reply rather predictable. Years before Joe Keller's firm ever started making aircraft engines; he had planted the seeds for the possibility of such an action as he later took. Joe Keller answered the ultimate question that Miller himself identifies as at the core of his playwriting, long before the events of the play commenced. What is the right way to live in the world, Miller asks in his play, and the answer Joe Keller's life provides is "to build a business for the benefit of your children."

The answer therefore to why Joe Keller killed himself is at the heart of what is most radical and subversive about Arthur Miller. Joe Keller based his life on a value system that encouraged him to do bad things for good reasons and the realization of this left him without honor and with no future. Miller's stated goal in writing this play was to "lay siege to the fortress of unrelatedness in which to arraign a particularly heinous anti-social crime."³ Joe's crime was the result of having no sense of responsibility or connection to anything larger than his individual family. Clearly, Miller saw this lack of community as disguised by an equally strong commitment to family and material success.

Critic Barry Gross articulates the idea that a lack of community is hidden behind “family values” in an exceptionally insightful essay on *All My Sons*. Gross points out that Joe Keller is guilty of an anti-social act not out of intent, but out of ignorance and that his is a crime of omission not of commission. For Gross, Joe Keller has no society because his world is bounded by commitments and allegiances that do not extend beyond the boundaries of his property. It is not that Joe Keller cannot distinguish between right and wrong, it is that his understanding of what is right and wrong has been determined by the only reality he has ever known. “If we fail to see Joe Keller in a human way,” argues Gross, “then we relegate him to that dark other-world where only monsters dwell, safely removed from to identify with it or admit our own compliance with it.” ⁴ Miller himself supports this view when he states that “the father should not be portrayed as the *source* of the injustice, but as its *deputy*. ⁵ Understanding this critical difference is not only to grasp Miller’s primary political component in the play, it is also the most important insight that a director may gain into the truth of Joe’s character and his relationship with his son.

It is fascinating to me that the limits of Miller’s radicalism also define what most critics see as the principle weakness of this play. This can be seen chiefly in the character of Chris Keller. It is really the internal struggle in Chris that provides Miller with the potential for something truly radical to take place. Throughout the play, Chris struggles with his inability to decide who he is and whether he should be different from his father and if so, in what way. When he watched his men die for each other in the war he learned what a true sense of community and connection to

the larger world meant. He sensed that somehow he needed to bring those insights back into his life and the price of freedom is the result of men who were willing to die defending it. Yet, when he comes home and opens the bankbook, drives the new car and uses the new refrigerator, he feels fraudulent and ashamed. He discovers that the war has had no philosophical meaning for Americans at home, concluding, that “the whole thing to them was kind of a bus accident.”

Yet even though Chris has the insight that his father could never have, he does nothing but contemplate the situation. “His shame and guilt are meaningless because they do not lead to action,” Barry Gross points out, “society’s case against Chris Keller is stronger than its case against Joe Keller because Chris knows better.” ⁶ After Chris has finally uncovered the truth about his father, he rejects Joe’s apology by saying, “once and for all you can know that there’s a universe of people outside and you’re responsible to it.” Chris knows that of course, but what actions has he taken that suggest that he has fulfilled that responsibility anymore than Joe has? The disgust Chris feels for his father is broadened when he condemns the system as a whole. “This is the land of the big dogs, you don’t love a man here, you eat him,” Chris says, “that’s the principle, the only one we live by.”

The irony of this statement is that it applies equally to Chris as it does his father in that Chris has come home from the war with this insight and done nothing to change his life. For many, the weakness of the play is that Chris is never forced to put his words into action. He seems to know that the war taught him that things needed to be

changed at home, but seems at a loss as to what those changes should be. Miller later admitted this weakness when he agreed that Chris does not propose to liquidate the business because it was built on the backs of the soldier's sacrifices, but simply to run it himself, just more cleanly. If Joe Keller is to be condemned it is because a better way of doing things is clearly evident and the means by which he could connect to the world is made clear by his son. "Miller is not guilty of presuming to teach, but of not pinpointing with sufficient sharpness Chris' amorphous and formless sentiments," argues Barry Gross, "that the world should be reordered is not at issue: *how* it should is." ⁷ Thus for Gross and many others, *All My Sons* fails to fulfill its own moral mandate.

Yet I would argue that the weakness might not lie in the play as much as the play reveals a weakness that lies at the heart of the American character itself. Chris Keller is a personification of the very contradiction pointed out by Barry Gross. Chris Keller (and indeed Arthur Miller and his entire generation of Popular Front intellectuals) sustained a deep ambivalence in their politics. In this regard, *All My Sons* is a remarkably accurate portrait of a generation of moral radicals who embraced political change but envisioned nothing beyond objecting to the immoralities of the present system.

Miller is simply reflecting his own ambivalence by giving Chris genuine social anger and at the same time the inability to conceive *how* the world should be reordered. Neither in Miller's art nor his political grounding is an answer to this question ever to

be found. This is why the often-cited weakness of *All My Sons* is actually its greatest strength. The seeming inability of Miller to pinpoint with sharpness Chris' sentiments is actually an exceptionally clear expression of those feelings. Miller has put his finger on a primary ambivalence in the American character when Chris condemns the very values that he is (at the same time) trying to retain. For Chris to articulate a clear and specific series of actions, some sort of real break from the social and economic world of his father is both inconsistent with his character and contrary to the point of the play. Chris Keller is a moral radical who is driven toward a more humane worldview and who condemns his father's outlook without rejecting the basic premise of American life. Chris is **torn** by competing desires and this internal competition, this inner conflict, and his attempt to resolve it is the "theme" of the play.

Thus we return to the basic thrust of this study that both the character and limitations of Popular Front radicalism shape this and other Miller plays. It is beyond question that *All My Sons* is advocating that the world be changed and that the individual must do something about it. It is also the case that Miller sees his artistic mission as exposing the need for the public significance of private behavior to be examined. This process is actually an epistemology of our social values and in that way "reveals" to Miller's audience the manner in which they come to hold the attitudes and values that are so destructive to the Keller's and many other of his chief characters. For *All My Sons* to answer the question posed by Gross (and others) would both rob it of the

clarity with which it critiques American life and the ambiguity which draws in the audience.

Miller perfected the idea of the revelation of process in his most celebrated play, *Death of a Salesman*. In this play more than any other, Miller fulfilled his self-definition of his radicalism as being the great writer (who is) a destroyer of chaos, a man privy to the hidden laws that bind us all and destroy us if we do not know them. In this case, the “hidden laws” are revealed by the story of the last few days in the life of Willy Loman. A man who has struggled all his life to support his family and give his sons a philosophy by which to live finds that the only meaning he has left in his life is to die and leave his insurance money to the son who has completely rejected his father’s ideals.

As was the case with *All My Sons*, the answer to why the major character has taken his life is also central to understanding the political motivation for the play and thus the key to staging the drama. Seen in this light, *Death of a Salesman* is not only Miller’s foremost play, it is also his most radical work as well. The moral radicalism that derived from his Popular Front sensitivities is nowhere more evident than in this play. In short, Willy Loman kills himself because the social values that he has internalized and translated into his personal convictions are so profoundly contradictory that he is unable to define himself in a way that allows him to be happy and fulfilled. He is the victim of his own inner dialogue that cannot harmonize two antithetical definitions of the American Dream namely; happiness and success. His

life and death is a metaphor for what Miller saw as the central problem in American life. Miller expressed this in his essay; "On Social Plays" where he derided the pecuniary values that Willy extolled. "It is necessary to know that the values of commerce, values which were despised as necessary but less than noble in the long past, " he argued, " are not merely perversely dominant everywhere but claimed as positive moral goodness itself." ⁸ Indeed this also was essentially the same problem that confounded Abe Simon. Neither Abe, nor Joe Keller, nor Willy Loman, nor even Miller's own father could see that they revered false values and that these values were inconsistent with true freedom and personal fulfillment.

Death of a Salesman makes war on these values and by implication also assaults the society that promotes and nurtures these beliefs. As critic, Esther Jackson points out; the salesman is symbolic of contemporary American life, a kind of hero who serves as a ritual representative of an industrial society. ⁹ The essence of the play reflects broadly held liberal views of the decade preceding its creation in that it challenges the basic moral premise of American capitalist society. By 1949, Miller's moral radicalism was seen through the prism of the anti-Communist hysteria as the promotion of a specific political agenda and it was after this play that he began to be (mistakenly) identified as a radical in the conventional political sense. If not an outright radical Miller was certainly out of step with the times, or as Tom Driver called him a "liberal optimist and the playwright of American liberal folklore." ¹⁰ The artist given the privilege of directing this play must understand the unique and subtle way in which this "liberal optimist" constructs his story that enables reality to

comment on itself and the meaning of the play (and its true radical force) to be intuitively rather than intellectually experienced.

An important key to understanding this play lies in comprehending why Willy Loman is unable to address the principle difficulty in his life. Willy is unable to feel happy and content unless he believes he is a success. This contradiction is the precise nature of his undoing. An appreciation for Miller's intellectual predisposition here could guide the director to grasp the central conflict within Willy's psyche. In the words of one scholar, Miller has removed the ground of tragic conflict from outer events to inner consciousness. **11** It is also crucial to understanding the characters of Biff and Happy and, strangely enough, leads one to see that *Death of a Salesman* is one of the most positive and optimistic dramas in the American canon. Concentrating on the clash between freedom and success not only brings Willy's character into focus, but it also serves as the means by which Miller's radical assertion can best be seen. Willy Loman, the play argues, lives in a society that uses words such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, words with a spiritual character, to define itself. These words would suggest that freedom constitutes the highest ambition for the society. Yet, the economic system distorts this subjective definition of happiness into an objective meaning, replacing it with the concept of material success.

Success for Willy Loman is the image of himself derived from the admiration other people will have when reacting to his financial achievement and social status. "It's who you know and the smile on your face," Willy tells Biff, "that's the wonder of

this country that a man can end up with diamonds here on the basis of being liked.”

There is no self-sustaining mechanism therefore that can help Willy answer the question that is at the heart of every Miller play; what is the right way to live in the world? Willy’s answer to this question is derived directly from the slogans of bourgeoisie life, “be liked and you will never want.” To be somebody (in an objective sense) is the goal of Willy’s life and constitutes the core ideology he passes on to his sons. Miller’s subversive implication is that society works not in some overt external way to influence Willy’s personal philosophy. But rather, Willy himself works as its agent, promoting its values because his personal beliefs (or what thinks are his personal beliefs) are indistinguishable from the socio-economic propaganda of the society. Orm Overland calls this conception, Miller’s identification of the central task in his work, “the creation of a form that can bridge the deep split between the private life of man and his social life.” **12**

Society does not broadcast over loudspeakers that Willy Loman must be a success, he *tells himself* that he isn’t worthy unless other people think he is a success. The moral radical (Miller) is taking powerful exception to a society that often operates in ways contrary to human happiness. The Popular Front rebel is engaging in the radical act of dissecting the nature of American society and placing the blame precisely where it belongs. What Willy believes, Miller suggests is “not a civilizing statute whose destruction threatens us all, but is rather a deeply believed and deeply suspect “good” which, when questioned as to its value, serves more to raise our anxieties than to reassure us of the existence of an unseen but humane metaphysical system in the

world.” **13** Grasping Miller’s politics means that the director is required to help the play unmask the pathology hidden behind or perhaps imbedded within the American dream. “How can a person keep his sense of right and wrong, “ asks Clinton Trowbridge, “ while grappling for a living in a business world which recognizes only the principle of the survival of the fittest?” **14**

This is why Willy Loman cannot be played as a downtrodden man with a bad territory, an inhumane boss and no pension. A production that reduces Willy to the sum total of his personal shortcomings narrows the scope of Miller’s play and shifts the focus from the social context of Willy’s dilemma to the realm of individual psychology. Esther Jackson argues this point when she claims that Miller is quite clear about the roots of Willy’s sickness in that it is ignorance that makes him suffer. **15** The personal struggles of Willy, Hap and Biff Loman are all causally related to their adherence to a set of false values that interfere with happiness and it is these values that Miller assaults in this play. The external action in the play is largely the story of what these three believe and how it comes back to haunt them.

The central relationship in the play is between Biff Loman and his father. In fact, it is Biff’s return from “the West” that has so upset Willy that he has an emotional breakdown while driving and nearly is killed. The source of this breakdown is Willy’s feelings of guilt and disappointment over Biff’s unsuccessful life. “He has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week, how can he find himself on a farm,” Willy asks his wife Linda, “ Biff Loman is lost in the greatest country in the world a man with such

personal attractiveness gets lost.” For Willy, Biff is lost because he has not become something “solid” that can either be shown in money or possessions. In effect, he has failed at the very thing his father most reveres.

Biff articulates this sense of being lost in the famous scene with his brother, which could be used as the best example of how understanding Miller’s political predisposition informs the successful performance of his work. The two men are alone in their old room and discuss the past, the present and the future as it relates to the growing emotional illness of their father. The scene is often played as two men who admit their anxieties and feelings of failure with each other and nothing is really resolved at the end. But what I believe Miller is actually doing here is letting each of the brothers attempt to win the support of the other for their life choices. Happy and Biff have inherited the same psychological contradictions possessed by Willy and they try to resolve this conflict by getting affirmation from their respective brothers for their decisions.

Happy has attempted to be content by trying to become a success. “It’s what I always wanted, my own apartment, a car and plenty of women,” he tells Biff, “but still goddammit, I’m lonely.” He tells Biff that he has little to work for except waiting for the merchandize manager to die. He lays out the unfulfilled nature of his life and tells Biff that, “everyone around me is so false, I’m constantly lowering my ideals.” Happy seems desperate for a change and willing to examine the true meaning of life. In fact, both Biff and Hap, like their father have lived their lives in a way contrary to the

American Dream. As Thomas Porter suggests they embody the “anti-myth, the rags-to-riches story in reverse, the story of the failure of the success myth.” 16

Biff has struggled to find some happiness despite his inability to discover a meaningful career living in the West. He knows that he loathes the idea of “suffering fifty weeks of a year, keeping stock, or selling or buying, for the sake of a two week vacation.” All Biff wants to do is be outside with his shirt off and not have to “get ahead of the next fella.” He infects Happy with a vision of a beautiful life in the West raising horses and working on a ranch. Listening to him, it is clear that Biff Loman has found his calling and should truly understand the meaning of happiness. Why wouldn’t this be a moment of real joy and self-realization for Biff?

The answer lies in what Miller saw as the fundamental reality in Biff’s (and indeed the nation’s) personal mythology. Just as he grasps fulfillment in his hands, *his own voice* tells him he isn’t a success. He tells Happy that “there is no more inspiring or beautiful thing than the sight of a mare and a new colt.” Yet, only a moment later he pulls the rug out from under his own happiness. “I suddenly get the feeling, My God, I’m not getting anywhere, what the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week,” he tells Hap, “I’m thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin my future.” “That’s when I come running home, and now, I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself,” he concludes, “ I’ve always made a point of not wasting my life and every time I come back here I know that all I’ve done is waste my life.”

Why cannot Biff answer his own doubts and by what measure does he feel that he is wasting his life? Thomas Porter argues that it is because “he represents all those Americans caught in the mesh of the success myth and the moral pressure it generates.”¹⁷ Here is where it is so important to understand Miller. By the end of the play, Biff is able to answer this question (unlike Happy or Willy who goes to his grave without ever having understood himself). I believe Miller, despite his stated intentions, made this play more about Biff than Willy and this is why he wrote the epilogue. It takes the death of his father to bring a moral transformation in Biff, an awareness of the truth that might easily be overlooked in a production because the attention of the audience is so often focused on the grief that Linda is feeling over Willy’s death. “He had the wrong dreams, all, all wrong,” Biff tells everyone at the gravesite in the epilogue, “he never knew who he was.” When Happy retorts with some of Willy’s familiar slogans, Biff says, “I know who I am kid.”

The self-knowledge that comes to Biff but doesn’t come to Willy is both Miller’s political statement and the play’s main event. Willy could never come to Biff’s realization, even though it was the truth, because (like Joe Keller) it would have violated everything he believed in and worked for. He had the wrong dreams Biff says, and Miller’s play begs the question, why did he have the wrong dreams and where did he get them? For Miller it cannot be only a matter of the individual psychology of Willy Loman. “The reason *Death of a Salesman* left such a strong impression,” Miller said later, “was that it set forth the picture of a man who was not

even especially ‘good’ but whose situation made clear that at bottom we are alone, valueless, without even the elements of a human person, when once we fail to fit the patterns of efficiency.”” “In short, the absolute value of the individual human being is believed in only as a secondary value,” Miller continued, “ it stands well below the needs of efficient production.” **18**

For Esther Jackson, Willy Loman has not sinned enough for these terrible things to happen to him and therefore “ he is the extreme example of our mutual ignorance, the most visible example of the myth of modern American life.” **19** He wishes desperately to love his son and yet is unable to accept the fact that Biff has not been able to get ahead in commerce “by making an appearance in the business world and being liked.” Willy torments himself because Biff is not successful and Willy equates success and usefulness and purpose in life. These are Willy’s personal dictums ingested from a pecuniary culture that makes a genuine relationship of love and respect between father and son precarious.

Willy cannot conceive of happiness (in himself or his children) without financial success, without “being somebody.” To Leonard Moss “the nature of Willy’s social relationships don’t allow him to challenge the conventional norms” because he can’t imagine anything beyond his conditioning. **20** Thus, he worships the memory of his unethical, cutthroat brother, Ben. “When I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen,” Ben tells Willy, “and when I walked out, I was twenty-one, and by God, I was rich!” Thomas Porter argues that Ben is a projection of Willy’s imagination, someone who

possesses the precious secret to (financial) success. For Porter, Uncle Ben rather than serving as a clear example of greed and lack of ethical principals, is instead, “the palpable proof of Willy’s doctrine.” **21**

What Willy never seems to grasp is that he is the victim of the very thing he cherishes. Although Miller uses Willy’s adulterous behavior as the specific incident that sours his relationship with Biff, it is actually Biff’s realization derived from that event that destroys trust and love between them. Biff sees that Willy has turned him into merchandise to sell in order to enhance his own self-image and promote slogans and values that he himself does not (or cannot) follow. Willy’s life and business slogans are being “sold” to his sons as Willy might peddle items from the line to important buyers. When Willy is fired after thirty-four years with the firm, he seems to take the first step in questioning the overall system. “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away,” he tells Howard, “a man is not a piece of fruit.” Yet, in the end he blames himself and agrees with Howard that, “business is definitely business.” His despair is only that he doesn’t seem to fit into the system anymore and he cannot support his family or win the respect of his sons.

I suggested earlier that Miller maintained the optimistic quality of the Popular Front in his writing and is indeed the most optimistic of American playwrights. “I am convinced the play is not a document of pessimism,” Miller would later argue, “a philosophy in which I do not believe. **22** If *Death of a Salesman* had ended with Willy’s death, one would have difficulty supporting this contention. However,

looking at the last scene and epilogue from the play supports the assertion that the drama is actually more about Biff than Willy and that the discovery made by Biff at the end of the play makes him the actual “tragic” character in this work.

The last scene in the play contains one of the most famous exchanges in American drama. The action culminates with Biff declaring, “I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you.” Willy summons up his last ounce of dignity and retorts, “I am not a dime a dozen, I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman.” This is most often interpreted as a desperate admission by Biff that he can never be what his father dreams and a desperate plea to be released from the crushing weight of his father’s expectations. It is far more interesting and more consistent with Miller’s political thrust however to conclude that this is actually a liberating truth that affirms Biff and Willy’s humanity. Because Willy can only see this through the prism of “success” he interprets it as an attack on his worth as a man and a rejection of him as a father. As an American, Willy can only translate this in economic terms as proof that he has been a complete failure. Without realizing it, Willy has so internalized these commercial values that he is acting as “society” and condemning himself to death.

Often lost in the true dramatic brilliance of this scene is the radicalism of Biff’s speech that precedes this exchange. Describing his feelings after being rejected in his business ideas by Bill Oliver, Biff pours out his new insights to Willy. “I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw the sky,” he tells his father, “I saw the things that I love in this world, the work and the food and the time to sit and smoke.” “Why

am I trying to become what I don't want to be, making a begging contemptuous fool of myself," he concludes, "when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am." Taking his father's face he says, "why can't I say that, Willy?" This is not the pathetic admission of a man who hates himself or is resigned to being a failure. This is not a man who says he is a dime a dozen out of spite or anger. Rather, this is a man who has discovered the antidote to social values that mark financial success and social status as the goal of life. Willy is pathetic because he can never grasp what is making him so miserable. Biff actually undergoes catharsis and gains the insight of the tragic hero. So, when he tells Happy in the prologue, "I know who I am, kid" he is asserting the positive message of the Popular Front radical who sees moral awareness as the key to social change. For as Leonard Moss argues, Miller is implying that society can be saved by its morally mature citizens. 23

Biff's insight is proof of the optimistic nature of the play and an excellent retort to its label as a deeply moving but intensely dark play. The possibility of an alternate version of events is everywhere present in *Death of a Salesman*. "There were a lot of nice days; making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch," Biff says to Charlie, "there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made." "Yeah," Charlie replies, "he was a happy man with a batch of cement." Had Willy only been able to see that, he *could have bravely admitted that it was just fine being "a dime a dozen."* Here is the radical potential in the play and the genuine expression of Miller's politics. This admission would have been a truly remarkable act for Willy Loman, because it would have involved him in a rejection of a central

tenet of the American mythology. The iconic significance of economic success was not a concept for Willy Loman; rather it was a fundamental part of his own sense of personal worth. The need, (yet the inability) of Willy to move beyond that self-definition (as Biff did) constitutes the political component of this play.

The brilliant scholar and critic, Christopher Bigsby, summarizes his version of the political core of Miller's work in this way. "Believing, as he does, that the artist is by nature a dissident, committed to the necessity of challenging the given," he declares, "Miller is equally compelled by a country which, despite its conservatism, is paradoxically committed to transformation." The true American is protean, Bigsby insists, but his imagination, which is the engine of real social change, is "usurped by facile fantasy and the brittle satisfactions of the material world." Yet both Miller and his main characters are unwilling to simply accommodate themselves to something less than the promise that is America. "People who are able to accept their frustrated lives," concludes Bigsby, "do not change conditions." Nowhere is the spirit of the 1930's cultural radical more evident in Miller than in this key concept pointed out by Bigsby. *Death of a Salesman*, like the Popular Front radicals themselves, is a love story between the characters and America. For them and their creator, America has proven a "wayward mistress worthy of redemption." 24

Understanding Miller's roots in the Popular Front era is equally critical in coming to terms with his 1953 play, *The Crucible*. *The Crucible* was Miller's first major play that was not crafted from the cloth of his own family's experience. It was written eight years after the end of the World War Two and created in an environment far

removed from the America that made *All My Sons* a critical and commercial success. Yet, in very interesting and subtle ways the basic political presumptions underlying its thematic structure are not different from those motivating his earlier works. As is well known, the play is set during the witch hysteria in Salem, Massachusetts with clear reference to the HUAC investigations taking place in Congress. The story centers on the lives of John and Elizabeth Proctor who are slowly sucked into the middle of the frenzy over the fear of witchcraft in the town. At first, Proctor will have nothing to do with the trials, which he views as ridiculous. But when his wife is condemned by one of the accusers and imprisoned, Proctor is forced to enter the fray to save her life. Eventually he is accused himself and he is confronted with the moral dilemma of admitting to a false charge to save his life or taking the equally uncomfortable option of “mounting the gibbet like a saint.” In the end, Proctor undergoes a moral transformation that allows him to find the courage to bring his own death by refusing to admit to a lie. As he goes to the gallows he says, “give them no tear, show them a heart of stone and sink them with it.”

Although the play is an unquestioned classic today this was not always the case. Most at issue were the political messages that people took from the play. In his celebrated exploration of the work, critic Eric Bentley derided the validity of the parallel between Salem in 1692 and the McCarthy period taking place in the United States. “The inadequacy of particular lines and characters is of less interest than the mentality from which they come,” said Bentley, “it is the mentality of the unreconstructed liberal.” For Bentley, *The Crucible* expressed a view of life which

“liberals have to unlearn and which many liberals have rather publicly unlearned.” Calling Miller the playwright of American liberal folklore, Bentley spoke for many critics in the 1950’s when he labeled the play, “a melodrama of indignation, in which the conflict (is) between the wholly guilty and the wholly innocent.” An analogy between the red-baiting of the period and the Salem witch hunts, argued Bentley can seem complete only to communists, because they were the only ones for whom the threat of communism (apparently to Bentley communists and liberals were interchangeable terms) was as fictitious as the menace of witches. **25**

In calling Miller an unreconstructed liberal, Bentley was choosing a title virtually synonymous with Popular Front radical. Both the play and Miller’s politics seemed terribly old-fashioned to Bentley in that they communicated a naïve sense of innocence in which the playwright seemed not to realize that the danger of communism was real while witches and witchcraft were fictitious. Expanding on this viewpoint, Robert Warshow in a 1953 article in *Commentary* magazine analyzed what he viewed to be the politics of *The Crucible*. Calling Miller the champion of the “liberal conscience” Warshow saw the Salem analogy as a revealing glimpse of the way the Communists and their fellow travelers had come to regard themselves. Because the old 1930’s radicals no longer had any substantive belief in Communism, he reasoned, they could rightly claim an outraged innocence at accusations similar to those experienced by the innocents in Salem. “Because he knows quite well that he believes in nothing, certainly that he is no revolutionist,” argues Warshow, “he is only a dissenter-in-general, a type of personality, a man frozen into an attitude.”

Warshow concluded his article with an attack on both *The Crucible* and the political predisposition he saw motivating the play. Those people who shouted bravo at the curtain of the play were, for Warshow “celebrating a tradition and a community.” No longer could they find any meaning in crying “strike!!” at the end of the play “(a reference to Odets’ play, *Waiting for Lefty*) as they had done in their younger and more primitive age,” he stated, “the important thing was that for a short time they could experience together their sense of right-mindedness in the orthodoxy of dissent.” Stripped of all principle and all specific belief, Warshow argues, these (Popular Front era) liberals had retreated into a kind of Calvinism of their own where political truth ceased to have any real connection with politics, where the people were “right” in themselves and no longer needed to prove themselves in the world of experience. For Warshow, liberals of Miller’s mindset were those for whom “revolution or liberalism or dissent, had entered into them as the grace of God was once conceived to have entered in to the elect and, like the grace of God, it is given irrevocably.” 26

These views betray both a misunderstanding of the central theme of the play and the nature of Miller’s radicalism. Miller, although certainly an unreconstructed liberal, was not writing from the perspective of a nostalgic, un-evangelized communist, outraged by the events surrounding Alger Hiss, Senator McCarthy and the Rosenbergs. The political motivation, the predisposition at work in the creation of *The Crucible* is not that of the communist, but the Popular Fronter. The essential

moral outrage expressed in this play is rooted in Miller's 1930's experience and is only marginally different (in substance) to that expressed in the Abe Simon trilogy. Miller saw in the McCarthy hysteria an opportunity to reveal the forces that were motivating this phenomena at the deepest level. The same forces were at work in Salem and the metaphor is stunningly effective, not because it teaches a lesson about Whittaker Chambers or Ethel Rosenberg, but because it reveals a possible explanation for the hysteria found in both periods.

Miller's play focuses on the social context in which the witch hysteria existed. As is the case in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, the phenomena troubling Miller is the inability of virtually anyone in the play to question the basic social premise of their existence. The real power in the Salem society lay not with the girls who called out their victim's names or the authority of the judges called from Boston and Beverly. Rather it emanated from the unquestioned support of the majority of the village for the application of religious categories to political actions. Miller is pointing his finger at the mindset (existing in both 1953 and 1692) that identifies the devil in unpopular beliefs. Critic Thomas Adler identified this phenomena in American life as the propensity to categorize things in terms of diabolically opposed absolutes, so that a political policy is equated with moral right and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence. Quoting Miller, Adler argues that, "in America any man who is not a reactionary in his views is open to the charge of alliance with the Red hell." 27

The Crucible is an artistic revolt, a statement of moral outrage against the extreme tendency in the American character toward moral absolutism and conversely is an argument in favor of moral flexibility. As E. Miller Budick points out, Miller is interested not only in establishing this moral absolutism and condemning it, but also in isolating the factors which cause the rigidity in the first place. Once again, the playwright is concerned with process, attempting to locate and analyze the sources of a moral arrogance exemplified by Governor Danforth in the play and Joseph McCarthy in the 1950's. Will Americans be able to acknowledge, asks Budick, that tyranny is the inevitable consequence of this moral absolutism and that this propensity is part and parcel of an American way of seeing the world? For Budick, the essential message of the play is that McCarthy and Danforth were not the major enemies of American liberty, rather it was the penchant to see outward signs (i.e. conformity) as evidence of inner conditions that most threatened individual freedom.

28

The implications of Budick's ideas suggest an extraordinarily profound insight provided by Miller in this work. Miller sensed that the seeds for the communist hysteria of his day were to be found in developments that took place in Salem. Miller traced the origins of McCarthyism to a pattern of American behavior that began when the Salem community attempted to protect itself from the real terror of witchcraft in its midst. "Your soul alone is the issue here," Danforth says to Proctor "and you will prove its whiteness or you cannot live in a Christian country." It was at this point that the first crack in the Calvinist commitment to the covenant of grace appeared, when

the State (in the person of Danforth) demanded that the individual (Proctor) give external evidence of the absence of sin. The political objectives of the Puritan government now demanded conformity to its will that denied the strict doctrine of God's choosing of the "elect" who would be given salvation. "They had muted the doctrine of the absoluteness of the covenant of grace, the ineffectiveness of signs to evident justification," states Budick, "in order to assert the importance of social conformity and an external obedience to the covenant, not of grace, but of church and state." 29

John Proctor in effect was forced to prove that he was a Christian and for much of the play his moral discomfort with the hypocrisy involved in this effort prevented him from doing so. In other words, his feelings of guilt that a man who committed adultery could never be clean enough to "prove his whiteness" as Danforth demanded, kept him from challenging the validity of the court itself. Miller argues that similar feelings of guilt throughout Salem resulted in a compliance that empowered the court to conduct its business without opposition. Guilt of the same variety associated with Proctor, Miller contends, was directly responsible for a similar "social compliance" which resulted in McCarthy's "court" conducting its business without opposition. Americans needed to prove their "whiteness" in the same way Proctor did and social compliance is the result of the sense of guilt which individuals strive to conceal by complying. "It was a guilt, in this historic sense, resulting from their awareness that they were not as Rightist as people were supposed to be," Miller

implores, “and substituting righteous for Rightist, (gives) one a comment equally valid for the Puritans.” 30

The proof of whiteness demanded by the State in the 1950’s was external evidence of “loyalty.” Just as the Puritan government was concerned with the eradication of witchcraft for the defense of Christianity, the American Congress was, in the words of Henry Steele Commager, concerned with eradication of disloyalty for the defense of Americanism. Just as the Puritans were attempting not only to impede witchcraft, but also to define an external measure of Christian character, the McCarthy crusade was designed to not only frustrate communism, but also to formulate a positive definition of Americanism and of loyalty. For Commager the nature of this loyalty was conformity, the uncritical and unquestioned acceptance of American political institutions, social relationships and economic practices. 31

Here Miller’s political predisposition is clearly evidenced in the manner by which *The Crucible* implicitly attacks Americanism through the metaphor of the Salem story. When Hale says to Elizabeth Proctor, “cleave to no faith when faith brings blood, prevail upon your husband to confess, let him give his lie,” Miller was pointing his finger at the same hypocrisy in the “confessions” demanded by HUAC. Like the judges in Salem, the authorities in Washington were not interested in discovering true disloyalty or fostering true loyalty, nor winning any spiritual victory, but rather extracting proof of compliance. Both sets of judges already had the names and information they needed, what they sought was conformity, the “whiteness”

demanded of all innocent people. But the concept of loyalty as conformity is a false one, argues Commager, because it is narrow and restrictive, denies freedom of thought and conscience and is irremediably stained by private and selfish considerations. ³² Miller's play illustrates this point in characters such as Putnam, Parris and Danforth who possess the greatest degree of external piety masking an equally potent amount of self-interest and vindictive motives.

It is the answer to the question "loyalty to what?" that brings us back to Miller's Popular Front roots that motivate the conception of this play. Fealty to the same god that destroyed Joe Keller and Willy Loman is required of the "loyal American" in the period that *The Crucible* was written. Beyond anything else, Americanism is synonymous with private enterprise and loyalty is associated with the support of the competitive system. Miller's moral aversion to worship of the profit system is the same force that assaults the ethical bankruptcy and hypocrisy of Americanism. Or as Commager argues, "do not the corporations which pay for full-page advertisements associating Americanism and patriotism with the competitive system expect, ultimately, to profit from that association?" ³³

In a painful and ironic way, Arthur Miller was fighting the same forces that were lined up against Artie and Ben Simon in *No Villain* eighteen years before. If Americanism is equated with competitive capitalism and loyalty is inseparably associated with private enterprise, then what happens if the economic system fails as it did in 1929? Writing at the time of *The Crucible*'s opening, the elderly historian,

Henry Commager might have been talking about any of Miller's major characters when he said that, "true loyalty may require, in fact, what appears to the naïve to be disloyalty." "Loyalty is a tradition, an ideal, a principle," he declared, "it is a willingness to subordinate every private advantage for the larger good." ³⁴ Seen in this light, Arthur Miller is the virtual personification of loyalty and has proven his "whiteness" in the arena of American artistic and intellectual life.

In 1956, *Holiday Magazine* invited Miller to return to the University of Michigan to write an article on his impressions of the campus in 1936 and 1956. In a piece that disturbed many University officials, Miller noted that "modern" students lacked the unique sense of participation that the playwright experienced as a student. "The excitement of belief is what is gone," Miller claimed "and its absence portends a tragedy in the making." The University dismissed Miller's article with the comment that "perhaps the University has not changed as much as Arthur Miller had." But, as William Wiegand notes, the evidence contradicted this notion of Miller's evolution. "The amazing thing was that the opposite was actually true, Wiegand argues, Miller had not changed at all. "He still believed in 1934-to-1938 with a passion that was undeniable." ³⁵

Indeed, rather than an evolution from the influence of the Depression years to the War and then to a new perspective in the post-War years, the career of Arthur Miller has been marked by an unending "excitement of belief" that was characteristic of the generation of liberal intellectuals writing in the 1930's, who greatly influenced his

mind and imagination. The effects of the Depression on Miller's family allowed him to see that it was a moral catastrophe. The eroding of his parents value system gave him the insight that the crisis exposed forever the hypocrisies of the American competitive economic and social system. These experiences were given political focus by his immersion in the intellectual milieu of the Popular Front and his plays have always reflected the basic intellectual and political presumptions of that period. Also in ways that Miller would not confront directly until the 1960's, his ethnicity played an important part in his political preoccupations. It gave him a particular sensitivity to the existence and destructiveness of fascism, especially as an aspect in the American psyche. The intense racism and anti-Semitism he personally encountered and his horror about the Holocaust manifested themselves in feelings of intense guilt and vulnerability that would find their way into his plays beginning with *After The Fall*, in 1964. Later in his life he also would find ethnic roots for his propensity to place a larger philosophical question at the center of his plays. The "intellectual traditions of Jewish life the Jew in me," Miller said in *Timebends*, "manifested themselves by centering [his] artistic mission on asking the philosophical question, what is the right way to live in the world?" Miller sees this insight as being drawn from his heritage and it gave him a realization of the "moral intensity of the Jews" and caused him to interpret his identity as that of a playwright that can "reveal what has been hidden and denied, to rend the veil." 36

These were and are the political underpinnings to Arthur Miller the artist. Miller's challenge to the presumptive myths of his society, myths which seemed to be so

clearly discredited by the Depression, ran headlong into the changed political climate of post-war America where such challenges were interpreted as attacks on the nation. "The point is that for a time in the thirties, a future still seemed to beckon upward," Miller said in *Timebends*, " but with the war's end, the coming of the Bomb, and the deepening hatred between East and West, there seemed nothing to look forward to but the next beat of one's heart." "To believe in a political philosophy was like agreeing to have one's teeth pulled out," continued Miller, " but (I simply) refused to lose hope." 37

This hope, the intellectual and artistic energy of the moral radical made the playwright both out of fashion and political suspect by the time *The Crucible* was written. "But as in Salem, a point arrived in the late forties," Miller said, " when the rules of social intercourse quite suddenly changed and attitudes that had merely been anti-capitalist, anti-establishment were made unholy, morally repulsive, and if not actually treasonous, then implicitly so." 38 Miller had not changed with the times and his feeling of being intellectually out of step caused him to experience a bitterness with the country that he had never imagined. "I could not help thinking that time was running out, not only on me but on the traditional American culture," Miller stated, "I was growing more and more frighteningly isolated, in life as in the theatre." 39 In gloom, Miller was forced to conclude that, "I could not hear the tempo of the time anymore." 40

Yet, the political views and artistic themes that made Miller feel outdated by the mid 1950's have proven to be primarily responsible for the status he has attained (with Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill) as one of America's three greatest playwrights. This designation has resulted from the supreme artistry in his work and his unswerving commitment to engage the anxieties and fears, the myths and dreams, of the American people. It is also due to the fact that he is one of the very few theatre artists still living that witnessed the Depression and saw what it revealed about the American Dream. Yet his international acclaim is the result of his artistic vision that has crafted works whose scope is far greater than one people or one national experience. For Miller his ongoing mission has been to locate the individual securely in a social, political and moral context. The study of his intellectual and political development has confirmed for me the absolute inseparability of Miller the man and Miller the playwright. In the words of Christopher Bigsby, (for Miller)" the imagination is a value and the theatre a testament to the human need to understand, to communicate and to create a reality which we can inhabit with dignity and hope."⁴¹

ENDNOTES

1. Christopher Bigsby, *Twentieth Century American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 172.
2. Christopher Bigsby, *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.50.
3. Arthur Miller, *Collected Plays* (New York: Viking Press 1957), p. 19.
4. James J. Martine, *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979), p. 11.
5. *Collected Plays*, p. 11.
6. Martine, pp. 12-13.
7. Ibid., p. 17.
8. Robert Martin, Ed, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 63.

9. Harold Bloom, Ed, *and Arthur Miller: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p. 31.
10. Bloom, p. 24.
11. Ibid., p.31.
12. Ibid., p 62.
13. *Theatre Essays*, p. 149.
14. Bloom, p. 42.
15. Ibid., p. 35.
16. Martine, p. 27.
17. Ibid., p. 40.
18. *Theatre Essays*, p. 59.
19. Bloom, pp. 36-37.

20. Ibid., p. 81.

21. Bloom, pp. 29-30.

22. *Theatre Essays*, p.152.

23. Bloom, p. 89.

24. Christopher Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 86.

25. Gerald Weales, Ed, *The Crucible* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 205-207.

26. Ibid., pp. 217-226.

27. *Cambridge Companion*, p.93.

28. Bloom, 129-134.

29. Ibid., pp. 133-34.

30. Ibid., p.133.

31. Weales, p. 399.

32. Ibid., p. 400.

33. Ibid., p. 401.

34. Ibid., p. 404.

35. Ibid., p. 291.

36. Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 338.

37. Ibid., p. 254.

38. Ibid., 341-42.

39. Ibid., p. 350.

40. Ibid. p. 445

41. *Twentieth Century Drama*, p. 247

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