

ARTHUR MILLER: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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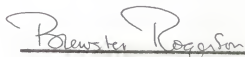
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ARTHUR MILLER: THEORY AND PRACTICE

The word "tragedy" seems to have come into the Miller vocabulary with the opening of Death of a Salesman. Early reviews used the terms "tragic" and "tragedy" as a matter of accepted categorization--that was the way the play had struck people--and essays range from 1949 to 1965 in a long struggle to finally settle the question: Is it or isn't it? Particularly, when Joseph Wood Krutch's study "The Tragic Fallacy" paralleled direct attacks on Death of a Salesman in stating that there could be no modern tragedy because modern audiences could not conceive of a man as being noble, Miller was drawn to counter with his "tragedy and the Common Man." It is an essay now nearly as widely known as the play itself, but hardly an impressive sample of Miller's thought. Its rather inept bows to Aristotelianism do more to indicate how off-guard Miller had been caught than to successfully refute Krutch or to establish the stature of Death of a Salesman as tragedy. Miller does strike some telling blows that are to remain solid in his later theories, but careless application for his personal purposes of such a debated and variously interpreted item as the "tragic flaw" leaves more precise consideration to be desired.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his 'tragic flaw,' a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, it really nothing --and need be nothing--but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status.¹

While there is no contradiction of Miller's later theories in "Tragedy and the Common Man," it is obvious that the essay was an answer formulated for the occasion. There is no indication that Miller conceived of Death of a Salesman as tragedy or, in fact, had thought much about any formal requirements for

tragedy at all before audiences categorized his creation as a fulfillment of at least the popular conception of the distinguished art.

It was not until 1955 when "On Social Plays" was published as a preface to A View From the Bridge that Miller presented a precise, complete, and personal theory of tragedy. He had been previously known as a "social" writer --even plagued with the tag. His early Leftist associations, reform-conscious plays, and Focus (a successful novel about anti-Semitism in American cities) had led people to expect to hear about social problems from Arthur Miller. A frequent cliché of modern theater links Miller and Tennessee Williams as the hope of American drama and compares them according to the neat formula, Williams : psychological poetry / Miller : social prose.

Arthur Miller's "On Social Plays" is a unique and rather extended treatise explaining from his point of view what tragedy has been, is, and must be in a significant theater. It is clear when one views the progression of his critical commentary that Miller has had a particular way of thinking about what he was doing and hoped to do, that when the reaction of audiences to his work suggested the affinity of his goals with traditional ones, the intellectual result came in the form of a theory that described Miller's ideal social play as rising from the kind of social situation that produces tragedy and as being identical in purpose and effect to that sought-after phenomenon.

Miller, in "On Social Plays," has gone back through the haze of critical theory that has gathered since Aristotle without accounting for any of it, and appears to have defined "his" kind of drama into the center of the tragic realm. He finds the essence of tragedy to be its manner of social expression: "That is, the relations of man as a social animal, rather than his definition as a separate entity, was the dramatic goal of the ancient Greeks."² He derives his explanation from the socio-political organization of the time. "The Greek

citizen of that time thought of himself as belonging not to a 'nation' or a 'state' but to a polis."³ The polis was a unit of democratic government small enough to call upon the opinion of all its citizens in all decisions. Each man was also considered fit for any occupation within the polis, and responsibilities for the various work shifted periodically. "The thing of importance for us is that these people were engaged, they could not imagine the good life excepting as it brought each person into close contact with civic matters."⁴ Thus, the drama was for them an expression of the combined needs and fulfillment of a people. "In Greece the tragic victory consisted in demonstrating that the polis--the whole people--had discovered some aspect of the Grand Design which also was the right way to live together."⁵ And the central character, the tragic hero, was not only a glorious individual, but also the man who embodied the spirit of and achieved the knowledge sought by the whole people. "In every dramatic hero there is the idea of the Greek people, their fate, their will, their destiny."⁶

Social drama, as it is understood in the modern theater, is drama that attacks the current society and arraigns its evils. This kind of commentary is not what Miller wished to see produced, for it involves a kind of "special pleading" which has no place in a genuinely social drama.

. . . when, in short, the dramatic form itself is regarded as inevitably a social expression of the deepest concerns of all your fellowmen--your work is bound to be liberated, freed of even the hypotheses of partisanship, if only because partisanship cannot thrive where the idea of wholeness is accepted.⁷

Miller does not advocate a drama which ignores the problems of individual psychology, but feels that modern drama has turned so far inward as to lose all contact with the whole picture of individuals as members of a body involving more than themselves and, perhaps, their families. "The single theme to which our most ambitious plays can be reduced is frustration."⁸ Drama other

then the genuinely social must be classed as "anti-social," even "anti-dramatic" by Miller. "To put it simply, even over-simplify, a drama rises in stature and intensity in proportion to the weight of its application to all manner of men."⁹ By "all manner" Miller is referring to the whole man, and not his subjective or social qualities alone. "Thus in such a situation [that of a genuinely social drama or therefore, that of tragedy] what we call social matters become inseparable from subjective psychological matters, and the drama is once again whole and capable of the highest reach."¹⁰

The failure of modern drama to attain tragedy, according to Miller, lies in its representation of a society which has failed to recognize the importance of the individual man. "The tragic victory is always denied us because, I believe, the plays cannot project with any conviction what the society, in the playwright's views at any rate, has failed to prove."¹¹ And though the Soviets have attempted to bridge the gap between man and his social unit with phraseology, the "Russian drama after the Revolution, such as ours, is a drama of frustration, the inability of industrialized men to see themselves spiritually completed through social organization."¹² Men, in a war-ridden, industrialized society, have become mere integers of no appreciable weight, and as such cannot be tragic. Miller demonstrates how even in current psychiatric practice a single individual is considered less important than his efficiency within his society.

In short, the absolute value of the individual human being is believed in only as a secondary value; it stands well below the needs of efficient production. . . . So long as modern man conceives of himself as valuable only because he fits into some niche in the machine-tending pattern, he will never know anything more than a pathetic doom.¹³

Within such a situation there is little question of a tragic figure representing all men's highest aims, for "the tragic figure must have certain innate powers which he uses to pass over the boundaries of the known social

law--the accepted mores of the people--in order to test and discover necessity."¹⁴ And our condition does not allow for such a figure.

We are so atomized socially that no character in a play can conceivably stand as our vanguard, as our heroic questioner. . . . For deep down we no longer believe in the rules of the tragic contest; we no longer believe that some ultimate sense can be made of social causation, or in the possibility that any individual can, by a heroic effort, make sense of it.¹⁵

The happiness we strive for in place of heroic excellence amounts to a truce with and not a conquering of our environment. "We have abstracted from the Greek drama its air of doom, its physical destruction of the hero, but its victory escapes us."¹⁶

Miller sees, however, hope for the drama of our time. He feels that audiences have just about exhausted their taste for frustration simultaneously with the near exhaustion of prose realism as a medium for drama. The paradox of the struggle in current drama is that dramatists are trying to write of "private persons privately and yet lift up their means of expression to a poetic--that is, a social--level."¹⁷ According to Miller, "verse reaches always toward the general statement, the wide image, the universal moment, and it must be based on wide concepts--it must speak not merely of men but of Man."¹⁸ Finally he asserts:

The social drama, as I see it, is the main stream and the anti-social drama a bypass. I can no longer take with ultimate seriousness a drama of individual psychology written for its own sake, however full it may be of insight and precise observation.¹⁹

With the perfection of production and distribution techniques, Miller feels that men are beginning to realize that none of the ultimate questions have been answered by prosperity and automation.

There is a kind of perverse unity forming among us, born, I think of the discontent of all classes of people with the endless frustration of life. It is possible now, to speak of a search for values, not solely from the position of bitterness, but with a warm embrace of mankind, with a sense that at bottom every one of us is a victim of this misplacement of aims.²⁰

The new drama that can come of this new unity and search for values is the social drama that Miller wishes to write.

It will be Greek in that the "men" dealt with in its scenes--the psychology and characterizations--will be once more ends in themselves, and once again parts of a whole, a whole that is Man. The world, in a word, is moving in the same boat. . . . Our drama, like theirs, will, as it must, ask the same questions, the largest ones. Where are we going now that we are together? For like every act man commits, the drama is a struggle against his mortality, and meaning is the ultimate reward for having lived.²¹

Though Miller's theory does ignore the basic matters usually discussed in a consideration of tragedy, the use of tragic victory being the only reminder of traditional concepts, his ideas seem rather to absorb than to oppose what others have had to say about tragedy. The notion of drama as inevitable social expression is perhaps the most time-worn of dramatic cliches, and David Daiches has offered theories about a "community of belief" that has existed for artists to draw upon in many cultures, but not in the twentieth century.²² T.S. Eliot would agree, also, that in our society the artist has been forced to design his own system of values, of convictions about the world and life, since none of universally accepted significance has persisted. Amusingly enough, Krutch, with his essay "The Tragic Fallacy," may be called a spokesman for those who have looked to some failing in society to explain the dearth, perhaps the impossibility of tragedy in the modern world.

Krutch complained that men were not noble, or at least that men couldn't consider other men noble enough for the stature of the tragic hero, and Miller would agree that that is exactly the problem that our society must overcome: men must once more matter. Discussions of tragedy have often turned to a consideration of the humanistic nature of the societies^{es} that have produced great tragedy--perhaps just another way of coming at Miller's central principle. Certainly, tragic victory as Miller explains it encompasses the ideas of the

Greek arete (ideal way of life) and the exaltation of man's spirits. The earliest tragedy is known to have been a part of public celebrations, and Herbert Muller in his The Spirit of Tragedy describes the polis much as Miller does.

They were citizens with recognized rights, subject to law but not subservient to arbitrary authority. The characteristic polis, or republican city-state, was essentially a free, 'open' society. . . . The poets proceeded to write to and for the entire citizenry. Like the Parthenon, drama was in effect the creation of the city, not a class. Or if, more strictly, it was the creation of great poets, these were manifestly stimulated by the free, full life Athens offered its citizens, and repeatedly expressed their pride in their city, their devotion to its ideals of justice and freedom.²³

The question of the action of tragedy's being "necessary and probable" as Aristotle insisted, and of its carrying the conviction of "destiny in the guise of fate"--as a modern Aristotelian, Susan Langer, submits (in Feeling and Form) --is less simply accounted for in "On Social Plays." We may only look again at what Miller says about the hero testing and discovering necessity for his society, about his victory being comprised of the ability of mere man to do so. Miller has presented the social drama as tragedy in terms of what the whole action does for and says about the society, and technicalities of form (if, indeed, there are to be any specified) are either incorporated into the observation of whole effects or are not mentioned.

The matter of "whole effect" upon the audience, the catharsis of Aristotle, that foremost test of tragedy, Miller has not slightly regarded. His entire theory so teeters on the condition of society that one might tend to wonder whether he is suggesting that tragedy can change society, or that when society is changed tragedy can occur. A careful examination of Miller's statements regarding his belief that society is coming to the mood in which dramatists can again effectively explore vital questions should set this irony in balance. Ultimately, Miller understands that without an audience to feel it, to know it, there will be no tragedy, and he has always recognized his dependence upon the

partnership of a receptive public to write the kind of drama he feels will be most fulfilling in our time.

In a word, there lies within the dramatic form the ultimate possibility of raising the truth-consciousness of mankind to a level of such intensity as to transform those who observe it. . . . In the profoundest sense I cannot create that form unless, somewhere in you, there is a wish to know the present and a demand upon me that I give it to you.²⁴

Miller's equation for tragedy, then, seems to be in an entirely different form from most combinations of the items described by Aristotle, and seems also to take into consideration items frequently ignored by the formula drafters and not noted by Aristotle since he was not preparing a formula. The equation might be described as adding the most vital questions and discoveries of man within his social relationships to a social situation that allows man the dignity of questioning and the power of acting upon his discoveries. When these two ingredients are combined in the proper proportions, Miller holds, the result will be tragedy.

He may appear to be cleverly evasive in insisting upon a quantity such as the condition of society that he cannot be held responsible for contributing, yet the presence of this "situational" quantity is implicit even in the equations that attempt to ignore it. No matter how many rules a drama adheres to, it is never considered tragedy until an audience is moved to call it such, until someone is sure he has experienced a catharsis. In describing what tragedy does, Aristotle was allowing for this outlet, this ingredient of audience reaction that identifies the real thing, the bona-fide tragedy.

In the examination of Miller's plays, it may be valuable to determine the extent to which they meet his own qualifications, to determine whether any of them do what he indicates they must in order to be important drama. The remaining element of the equation, the social situation, remains to be seen, and for Miller himself the greatest concern seems to be not whether he has produced

tragedy, but whether contemporary audiences may soon be found in a situation conducive to the production of tragedy.

"On Social Plays" was presumably written after three of Miller's plays had been acknowledged as major efforts by American and foreign audiences, written to accompany a fourth. Neither within this treatise, however, nor anywhere else does he offer to demonstrate his theory in operation or with operational qualities latent--in his work or in anyone else's. It remains for the interested student to consider how Miller's plays may apply to his theory or how his theory may apply to his plays. Thus the most vital question for Miller himself is also left unanswered and unexplored: How far has his work accomplished what his theory says that great drama must accomplish?

As is usual with theories that attempt to rationally express and categorize art, the unknowns involved are too large to permit an exact answer to either of these questions. In fitting the characteristics of any work into the stipulations of a theory there is always a danger of dealing so roughly with the delicate matters of creative selection that we may be blind to the actual artistic value of the work. Even in demonstrating that some works do appear to "do" (also an inexact term highly dependent on subjective audience reaction and subjective reporting of subjective audience reaction) what Miller thinks that they must be great, we still cannot prove and will never be able to "prove" that these works are great by universal standards. Still, the opportunity for much exploration does present itself here, and neither the theory nor the plays will begin to be done justice until such exploration has been undertaken and its relative fruitfulness evaluated.

II

Indeed, Miller has always been concerned with social aspects of man's existence, but it was not until he formulated the conception of the play that

was to be his first Broadway success, All My Sons, after "the eighth or ninth I had written up to the mid-forties,"²⁵ that he discovered the dramatic idea that was to suggest the essence of his mature productions: "Something was crystal clear to me for the first time since I had begun to write plays, and it was the crisis of the second act, the revelation of the full loathsomeness of an anti-social action."²⁶

The anti-social action that provides the crisis in the second act of All My Sons is that of a man who, to keep up his schedule of war-time production, allows twenty-one cracked engine heads to be sent out. The course of the play is centered upon Joe Keller's realization of the horror of his crime that resulted in twenty-one dead pilots, an act that he could see only as a necessity to the prosperous preservation of his family. It becomes the part of his sons, Chris and Larry, three years after Joe's partner has gone to jail for the crime, to convince Joe that his responsibility goes beyond his own family, that it extends, in fact, to all men's sons.

When Joe, near the close of the second act, attempts to defend his action to Chris as having assured a business for his sons, Chris asks a number of the perplexing questions that, when answered, may provide a way to live.

For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me!--I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the Goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world--the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?²⁷

Joe recognizes a new point of view in Chris's outburst, but he cannot yet accept it as meaningful in regard to his own life. When his wife, Kate, asks him to tell Chris he is willing to go to prison, Joe clings to his conviction that the needs of family are supreme. "I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head!"²⁸ Chris has

asked the questions, all right, but cannot find the strength without the help of his brother to force the answers on a father he loves. Before that help arrives, he displays the world view of thwarted idealism:

Do I raise the dead when I put him behind bars? Then what'll I do it for? We used to shoot a man who acted like a dog, but honor was real there, you were protecting something. But here? This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him! That's the principle; the only one we live by--it just happened to kill a few people this time, that's all. The world's that way, how can I take it out on him? What sense does that make? This is a soo, a soo!²⁹

Larry's help comes at the eleventh hour in the form of a letter he wrote three and a half years earlier to tell his fiancée that he would not be back from his next flying mission. He had gotten news of the conviction of Joe and his partner, his fiancée's father, and had determined not to return. "They'll probably report me missing. If they do, I want you to know that you mustn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him--"³⁰ Joe, with this revelation, at last sees what his sons have meant. "--Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were."³¹ He then quietly walks into the house to put a bullet in his head. Chris now can answer his mother when she wants to know what more they can be than sorry. "You can be better! Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son, because that's why he died."³²

When crowds thronged to fill the Coronet Theatre in January of 1947, and critics admitted the artistry of this nearly too well-made, Ibsen-esque drama, the most frequent and curious remark was phrased "This play is important--it means something." The remark is a curious one, because in its seeming naivete, it may reveal simply a measure of success that no complex analysis could explain. With a bit more sophistication, John Gassner undertook the explanation of just what was important about the drama and stated that the plot was not

simply calculated, not simply well-made: "The argument, the idea, or the author's passion for something beyond the theater dominates our interest. . . . Miller, in short, created his play rather than merely contrived it. He presented life, as well as argument, on the stage."⁵³

Perhaps the most significant indication that the importance of the social play Miller insists upon in "On Social Plays" has been realized within this first work revolving about an anti-social action is that no one thought to label All My Sons a "problem play." The idea of cracked engine heads may help to catch and hold the interest of an audience because of its topical relevancies, but the question of social responsibility extends even far beyond the problems of downtrodden workers and capitalistic employers, or the problems of women's rights that have provided material for so many social "thesis" plays. There was little chance of audiences' splitting to either side of Miller's special plea; Miller makes use of the situation set in a milieu of contemporary significance to plead for an eternal value: human integrity. Within the mind of man aroused to heroism there is no nay to this plea.

As Miller's theory suggests, responsibility is discovered and borne by a representative of the social unit, Joe Keller. That the major questioning is ostensibly done by his son Larry may be confusing, and has led William Wiegand to devise an interpretation that divides the major action in this and other of Miller's plays between two characters--one who knows and one who discovers. The interpretation is to an extent plausible, and the division of labor may be an effective means of dramatically articulating the conflict between the easy choice and the heroic one. The important thing, however, is that Joe possesses the guilt that all of us do for any of our selfish, anti-social action, and is led through the significant, the heroic question "Who is my son?" to the discovery and ultimate action, retribution by death, that expresses for all society

the way in which to live.

If Joe Keller's action means something or is important to those who witness his story, if he succeeds in convincing an audience that his choices matter as well as in coming to the realization himself, then perhaps the common man can be noble, perhaps Joe Keller can stand as a heroic questioner for his polis, perhaps Miller has begun to fulfill his theory, and in fulfilling it to demonstrate its validity in the twentieth century.

It is interesting that while Miller exploits the family situation throughout his dramas, his purpose is to express the importance of life outside the family. He sees modern man as having retreated into the security of his family in the face of a hostile and warring world, while modern drama has rejected that alien place (the world) in favor of individual psychoanalysis. In a discussion "The Family in Modern Drama" (1956) Miller touches on ideas that permeate his dramatic work:

Now I should like to make the bald statement that all plays we call great, let alone those we call serious, are ultimately involved with some aspect of a single process. It is this: How may a man make of the outside world a home?⁵⁴

He describes that dramatic form he aspires to as a dynamic blend of what we "feel" in the family relation and what we must "know" in the social one.

As Joe Keller was forced to acknowledge his responsibility to his social home, the Lomans in Death of a Salesman suffer from the attempt to establish the wrong kind of home in the outside world. There is perhaps no better known play in American drama, and none about which more arguments have raged in an attempt to establish its status as tragedy. Though Willy never does realize that his dreams of becoming "well-liked" as the result of selling his own personality--dreams that have left him a broken, lonely man and have all but ruined his sons' chances for fulfillment--are all the wrong dreams, he does

find the strength for his final act of self-sacrifice through an acknowledgment of the most solid value that is available to him--love. His wife Linda's unquestioning devotion is nearly unbelievable, and the love of his son Biff that has survived the crumbling of the castles Willy had built around Biff finally spurs Willy to the only redeeming deed he can imagine, one that demonstrates his unwillingness to settle for half. (a quality that Miller believes heroes must have).

If Willy's sacrifice can be no more than a negative statement about the way to live in the world, Biff, at least, seems to have gained the knowledge necessary for a positive stand when he tells Willy about his petty theft of a fountain pen.

I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw--the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office making a contemptuous, begging feel of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!35

Here again, the message to be delivered by the dramatic conflict appears to be distributed between two characters, Willy and Biff, and presents a complication for the conventional "search for the tragic hero and the tragic triumph" by which likely candidates for the supreme crown are dissected. Biff, like Larry in *All My Sons*, stands in a clearer light than his father, and is able to articulate the central problem or vital error in the latter's conduct of life before the discovery that leads to the climactic catastrophe is made--the tragic action that precipitates the tragic victory or triumph.

At first, there seems a vast difference between the two plays in that Biff's life has been so nearly ruined by the same lie that plagues Willy, while Larry appears merely to be casting disdain at his father from a morally super-

ior position. On second look, however, it is apparent that Larry stood to be ruined as a man just as Biff did, if the mistake, the wrong in his father's view, could not be recognized and corrected. Larry faltered just as Biff did under the burden of renouncing the father that he loved and had trusted, but in both cases the denial of the father's faulty values frees the son from a life of hypocrisy and unmanly compensation. Larry will not accept partnership in a business whose success is tainted by corruption, and Biff will not go on futilely exaggerating his own importance to the point of actually accomplishing less than nothing in his lifetime.

In Death of a Salesman, because Willy has degenerated so far in his delusion many people find it difficult to grant him the dignity of tragic heroism, and for some Biff is therefore the likelier candidate. Willy does not even make the discovery, it is argued; he does not die for the right reason; because he kills himself while still under the power of his old dream of a glorious future for Biff, his death is not tragic, only pitiful. It is true that Biff expresses the most complete discovery of the lie of which their lives are constructed, and that Willy apparently goes to his death still refusing to recognize the whole truth, but it is perhaps questionable whether audiences would accept sudden clarity of mind from a man already so demonstrably disturbed. Also, Willy does make the discovery most vital for him at this point in his life, although he does not fully recognize the logical implications of his discovery, he dies for the right not the wrong reason.

Not only would a full realization from Willy be improbable, it would serve a destructive rather than a redemptive purpose. For Willy to be cruelly faced with the truth that his entire life has been a lie, would be to offer the death blow to a man already beaten by the real facts of life. This death would have nothing of triumph, but only whimpering despair to accompany it. Instead,

Willy is raised to a joyful victory by the positive truth he discovers, and, by reason of his psychotic state he is spared any acknowledgment of the warped creed of life that has heretofore obscured the truth. At the height of Biff's impassioned denunciation of his father, Willy discovers that his son loves him. At another time, the discovery of this positive and solid value, love, might have provided a basis from which deluded hypocrisy could be dispelled, but here, at the end of Willy's possibilities for living, the discovery provides him with enough strength to offer all that he can to the son who loves him, to affirm the new value with his last act.

With the recognition of the importance of Death of a Salesman and the corresponding cries of "tragedy" from all sides, the inevitable conflict arose between what many recognized as a "social" play and the lofty, universal creation, tragedy. Eric Bentley describes what he finds an ineffective confusion of two forms in which the "'tragedy' destroys the social drama; the social drama keeps the 'tragedy' from having a fully tragic stature."⁵⁶ Mr. Bentley's analysis might have a good deal of significance if it could be accurately applied to Death of a Salesman, but it is now generally recognized that though Willy's story is not improbable and in fact is quite powerful in the given context of the false values of salesmanship in the United States, the real problem is more that of Willy: deluded human than Willy: discarded employee. As John Gassner has said, Willy is a personality "too big in his feelings and necessary pretensions to be merely a case history soluble by social legislation."⁵⁷

Indeed, as we have seen, for Miller a tragedy is and must be a social play, though not in the immediate "problem" play sense to which we are accustomed. The impact of Willy's plight is in no small measure powerful because of the details of his situation identifiable in the lives of thousands of middle-class Americans who have witnessed and will witness his dilemma, but the

vital discovery of the play is a discovery about retaining a grip on truly valuable things, a discovery that might or must be made by all people at all times. Miller himself would like to be able to explain the curious success of his Death of a Salesman in Scandinavian countries. Laplanders who came back night after night as if in the observation of some ritual are puzzling to those who would limit Death of a Salesman to the proportions of a topical problem play.

Ironically, in view of the scorn we have seen Miller display toward purely inward-looking psychological revelations, Death of a Salesman has, from its opening, drawn admiring comments from members of the psychiatric profession regarding the accurate portrayal of the return of the repressed through the erupting unconscious of a person like Willy. Dr. Daniel E. Schneider in The Psychoanalyst and the Artist considers at length the significance and psychological accuracy of the problem of the less favored second son both in All My Sons and in Death of a Salesman. Such specialized approaches offer welcome witness to the validity of characterization in these plays, but they describe only facets of Miller's intention and of his accomplishment.

Though the critics continue to disagree about the exact categorization for Death of a Salesman, few deny that it is one of the most important plays to come out of twentieth-century America. We have seen the problems involved in determining just who, if anyone, is the heroic questioner, the vanguard of society. The answer may basically lie in the determination of the discovery: Is the discovery love? Or is it integrity of self? It appears that the whole statement of how to live in the world that is made by Death of a Salesman involves both these discoveries and cannot omit either and still achieve its victory.

It is gratifying to find that Death of a Salesman fulfills Miller's

requirements for important drama. Further, it is exciting to see that the play has stirred a debate that is vitally concerned with the possibility of its being tragedy and that Miller's concepts may be applied in an argument that begins to establish the plausibility that Willy's discovery is a tragic one. We must observe, however, that All My Sons fulfills Miller's requirements just as completely as Death of a Salesman, yet no one has suggested that it may be a tragedy--neither do I intend to begin the argument. Though Miller's concepts of tragedy are not antithetical and may in some cases express identical qualities, tragedy does not necessarily result from conformance to the stipulations of "On Social Plays."

In dealing with his next play, The Crucible, Miller was glad to be able to work with more articulate characters. "I was dealing with people very conscious of an ideal, of what they stood for They know why they struggled . . . they knew how to struggle . . . they did not die helplessly."³⁸ The ideals, the struggles, and the deaths were those of the seventeenth century citizens of Salem, Massachusetts, who were drawn into the fury of the witch trials. That some honor and truth remained in the village at the height of mass delusion was demonstrated by the refusal of some of the accused to confess to having had dealings with the devil, and, thereby, to retain their lives.

Miller's drama focuses on the behavior of John and Elizabeth Proctor, farming people, and is the nearest of any of Miller's drama to the conventional formula for tragedy. It differs from All My Sons and Death of a Salesman in embodying a clear and forceful human effort for the "right" from beginning to end in the person of John Proctor. *John*, unlike Joe Keller and Willy Loman, is allowed to see his place and act purposefully at the moment of crisis, and not simply long after the ruinous damage has been done. John's recognition involves the realization that his action can be meaningful; he had considered

himself a sinful man since he had committed adultery. "I cannot mount the gibbet like a saint. It is a fraud. I am not that good man. My honesty is broke, Elizabeth; I am no good man."³⁹ Elizabeth urges him to forgive himself. "Whatever you do, it is a good man does it . . . I have sins of my own to account. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery."⁴⁰ His wife urges him not to take her sins upon himself, but John decides to confess and have his life.

It is not until the judges demand that he name other innocent people that John revolts, and he no sooner signs the confession to be displayed on the church than he seizes it. He cannot give up his name to a lie.

Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life!
Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the
dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name?
I have given you my soul; leave me my name.⁴¹

Since the Judge will not accept a confession of admitted lies, John tears and crumples the paper, realizing that there is enough of good in him to make his action more than a mockery. When Reverend John Hale, who fears the sin of having convicted innocent people, pleads with Proctor that he cannot hang, Proctor allows his intention a last positive statement.

I can. And there's your first marvel, that I can. You have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor. Not enough to wave a banner with, but white enough to keep it from such dogs.⁴²

The Crucible deals most figuratively with a motif that many commentators have explicated throughout Miller's work--that of guilt. All My Sons and Death of a Salesman dealt with the discovery of some wrong, the revelation of guilt and consequent self-punishment. Much of The Crucible's positive impact results from the fact that John Proctor is not wrong; he moves beyond his guilt. Beyond guilt that guilt may be looked upon as being merely the negative incentive that precedes the positive resolution. Miller has explained this progression in terms of developments in his thinking as a dramatist:

In The Crucible . . . there was an attempt to move beyond the discovery and unveiling of the hero's guilt, a guilt that kills the personality. I had grown increasingly conscious of this theme in my past work, and aware too that it was no longer for me to build a play, as it were, upon the revelation of guilt, and to rely solely upon a fate which exacts payment from the culpable man. Now guilt appeared to me no longer the bed-rock beneath which the probe could not penetrate. I saw it now as a betrayer, as possibly the most real of our illusions, but nevertheless a quality of mind capable of being overthrown.⁴³

John Proctor makes the heroic stand, perhaps the tragic stand, in affirmation of man's need for dignity among men, but an unfortunate production at the height of McCarthyism appears to have blurred Broadway's reception of the play in January of 1953. The play had undeniable topical relevancies in view of the current Senate investigations, relevancies which precipitated a good deal of irrelevant praise and blame according to reviewer's sympathies in the contemporary affair. Later performances have drawn more unconditionally glowing reviews.

The remoteness of time and the consequent fact that the moral questions involved in the witch trials are all well settled in the minds of contemporary audiences, allow for the first time in Miller's drama the plausibility of a single, noble though "common," heroic questioner who achieves a clear-cut personal victory in the name of the integrity that remains in his community. Still, if the relationship of this remote material to certain fiery topical issues was disconcerting to some, to others it was an affirmation that the same questions may rise to be answered time and again, and that a clear discovery will always require the pitiable suffering of man and his integrity that it exacted long ago in Salem.

The discovery that John Proctor can offer to his people speaks of the necessity of truth, of the victory of truth, even when the choice of it means the loss of life. Such a discovery would be common enough, but Proctor has not come to his choice easily; he had first to consider himself worthy to stand for his

people. In overcoming his guilt, in coming to see that he has a right to goodness, John Proctor makes a discovery as important to those in his society and in ours as it is to the development of Miller's philosophy; guilt is a destructive illusion; it must be overthrown before man can execute a responsible action.

At any rate, with much less stir than that caused by Death of a Salesman, The Crucible has quietly taken its place with many critics as an example of tragedy in American drama. D.D. Raphael in his The Paradox of Tragedy considers it one American drama that has some "claim to greatness," and Jordan Miller's anthology, American Dramatic Literature, quite simply defends the selection of The Crucible to represent tragedy and incidentally provides for the induction of the common man to the rolls of heroes.

As he dies, John Proctor raises human nobility to the level expected of the tragic hero. He was no 'great' man, and his worldly position was of little consequence. But faced with the decision to keep his life and lose all human respect for himself, or to die in defiance of those who would declare themselves his betters and thus redeem all the pain and sorrow he had caused within his limited world, he made the choice that broke the back of the power that executed him. And that is tragedy.⁴⁴

Thus, The Crucible presents a further development in Miller's thinking without violating the line of his social play theory. It also makes more readily discernible use of the conventional tragic structure than any of his previous plays did. However, as with Death of a Salesman, The Crucible's bid for the title "tragedy" appears to depend on factors not accounted for--or not completely accounted for--in "On Social Plays."

In A View From the Bridge, it is Eddie Carbone, the man who squeals to the immigration officials about his wife Beatrice's cousins, who will not settle for half. Eddie takes the two illegally entered "submarines," Marco and Rodolpho, into his home in accord with an understood policy in this Italian waterfront neighborhood. When Rodolpho, a handsome young blond who Eddie feels

is highly effeminate, begins to keep constant company with Beatrice's niece, Catherine, whom Eddie has raised and now desires to keep with him, Eddie retaliates first by trying to prove that Rodolpho is "not right."

Miller has in this case employed an articulate lawyer, Alfieri, to make explicit the ancient social meshes of these people, and the intricacies of moral-social law that must govern them. When Eddie comes to him for help against Catherine's marrying Rodolpho, Eddie hears that the action he is being driven toward will be a crime against society.

The law is only a word for what has a right to happen. When the law is wrong it's because it's unnatural, but in this case it is natural and a river will drown you if you buck it now. Let her go. And bless her. Somebody had to come for her, Eddie, sooner or later. You won't have a friend in the world, Eddie! Even those who understand will turn against you, even the ones who feel the same will despise you!⁴⁵

Eddie makes the anonymous call, however, and only at the last minute urges Catherine to get the brothers out of the house. Marco, whose family was depending on the money he could earn and send home to them, spits in Eddie's face and accuses him in front of the whole neighborhood as he and Rodolpho are taken away, and Eddie realizes that he has lost his name. To be exposed is to admit that he had ignored his social conscience to satisfy a selfish passion, and Marco must restore his name to him. Marco, meanwhile, cannot understand a law that allows a man like Eddie to live:

Rodolpho: Marco, tell the man.

Marco: What will I tell him? He knows such a promise is dishonorable.

Alfieri: To promise not to kill is not dishonorable.

Marco: No?

Alfieri: No.

Marco: Then what is done with such a man?

Alfieri: Nothing. If he obeys the law, he lives. That's all.

Marco: The law? All the law is not in a book.

Alfieri: Yes. In a book. There is no other law.

Marco: He degraded my brother. My blood. He robbed my children, he mocks my work. I work to come here, mister!

Alfieri: I know, Marco--

Marco: There is no law for that? Where is the law for that?

Alfieri: There is none.

Marco: I don't understand this country.⁴⁶

Marco agrees to the dishonorable promise, but his honor cannot be set aside and he comes to confront Eddie as soon as he is out on bail.

Eddie--he gradually comes to address the people: Maybe he come to apologize to me. Heh, Marco? For what you said about me in front of the neighborhood? He knows that ain't right. To do like that? To a man? . . . Wipin' the neighborhood with my name like a dirty rag! I want my name, Marco. Now gimme my name and we go together to the wedding.⁴⁷

In the struggle that follows Eddie pulls a knife and Marco turns it back on Eddie.

Though Alfieri tells himself that it must be better to settle for half, yet he knows there was something purely honest in Eddie's action.

. . . for I confess that something perversely pure calls to me from his memory--not purely good, but himself purely, for he allowed himself to be wholly known and for that I think I will love him more than all my sensible clients.⁴⁸

In A View From the Bridge we return to "the full loathsomeness of an anti-social action" that gripped Miller's conception of All My Sons, and this revelation goes further than any of Miller's efforts toward relating the values of two societies distant from one another in time and space. Both the Greek form and the musings of the articulate chorus, Alfieri, allude to the invisible ties that link the codes of the contemporary New York Italian polis to the codes of their ancient Adriatic ancestors. Here, also, we are able to see the dichotomy that may exist between the code of the polis and the laws of outsiders that must allegedly govern the people. Eddie's call to the police was loathsome and anti-social even though it was in accord with the official "law," and for Marco to obey the law that says that he may not revenge himself on Eddie would be unspeakable dishonor. The discovery of the overwhelming significance of polis law is made by Eddie when he realizes that he can bear anything before he can accept dishonor in the polis, the loss of his name that accompanies the revelation of his anti-social action. Victory is realized in

the retribution of his death and the consequent reestablishment of stability in the polis.

A View From the Bridge opened September, 1955, with another one-act, A Memory of Two Mondays, to mixed reviews. Some highly praised the starkness of Greek tragedy, while others were critical of an artificial commentator ("chorus") in Alfieri. Before a much happier opening in London, Miller had increased the dialogue by some twenty minutes, making Eddie more sympathetic and simultaneously strengthening the parts of Beatrice and Catherine, and he had brought the Act-one curtain down at the end of a high-pitched scene in Eddie's apartment. After having seen the New York production, Miller realized that much more of his own spirit and psychological life were in the play than he had realized. "Now there were additional things to say because I had come to the awareness that this play had not, as I had almost believed before, been given to me from without, but that my life had created it."⁴⁹ A new set and corresponding action were designed with the central idea of bringing the people of the neighborhood into the foreground of the action.

Thus his Eddie's 'oddness' came to disappear as he was seen in context, as a creature of his environment as well as an exception to it; and where originally there had been only a removed sense of terror at the oncoming catastrophe, now there was pity and, I think, the kind of wonder which it had been my aim to create in the first place. It was finally possible to mourn this man.⁵⁰

The changes Miller made in the re-working of this play identify the key to its success in Miller's eyes as well as on the boards. While Eddie stands apart, a weird creature alienated even from his own people, he cannot stand as a respected questioner--for his people or for the audience. But if Miller has, indeed, succeeded in blending Eddie back into his environment until he can be mourned by his neighbors, then we too, can mourn, mourn with wonder at the action that has taken place before us.

After the opening of A View From the Bridge and A Memory of Two Mondays in 1955, New York was to wait nine years for another new Miller play, and when it finally came in 1964, many were not disappointed. The author has said, "This play is not about something; hopefully, it is something." After the Fall "is," indeed, a long two acts that guide the audience through the tortuous paths of a man's analysis of his life to the acceptance of himself as living "after the fall" and to the possibility of hope and courage once the acceptance has been made.

. . . is the knowing all? To know, and even happily, that we meet un-
blessed; not in some garden of wax fruit and painted trees, that lie of
Eden, but after, after the Fall, after many, many deaths. Is the know-
ing all? And the wish to kill is never killed, but with some gift of
courage one may look into its face when it appears, and with a stroke of
love--as to an idiot in the house--forgive it; again and again . . .
forever?52

The play is the development of a structure that occurred to Miller when he was first thinking of Death of a Salesman. He was then thinking of calling it The Inside of His Head, and of having the entire proscenium filled with a face that would open to reveal the action that took place inside Willy's head. The setting for action taking place in the mind, thought, and memory of Quentin includes three sculpted levels that provide for many separate acting areas representing the parts of Quentin's brain where the people he thinks about appear and disappear as they do in his thinking.

Quentin himself appears on the stage to wind through the soliloquy-narra-
tion interspersed with reenacted incidents involving family, clients, friends,
colleagues, mistresses and wives. The whole is heavy with highly articulate,
perhaps drily expository thought whose variety and depth can only be abused by
a concise outline. As in The Crucible, Miller takes up the question of guilt
to grapple with it until his hero can move beyond it. Quentin once possessed
a blissfully innocent sense of certainty and purpose about life which has been

battered by the course of his living until he must see that little is simply good, that even love cannot be trusted, and that he himself is guilty of selfishness and cruelty. At times Quentin finds some guide in truth: "Speak truth, not decency--I curse the whole high administration of fake innocence! I declare it, I am not innocent! Nor good!"⁵³ His positive appeal for the recognition of evil is at one point allusively reminiscent of Anouilh's eternal nihilistic "NO." "I am not sure what we are upholding any more--are we good by merely saying no to evil? Even a righteous 'no' bears some disguise. Isn't it necessary . . . to say . . . to finally say yes . . . to something?"⁵⁴ And finally, in anger to his frenzied wife Maggie, who had lived by the declaration that she was all love: "Do the hardest thing of all--see your own hatred, and live!"⁵⁵ Perhaps the most poignant image of what Miller is saying is presented by Helga, the woman whom Quentin would love if he could find some reason to believe in himself, in the promise he might give.

I know how terrible it is to owe what one can never pay. And for a long time after I had the same dream each night--that I had a child; and even in the dream I saw that the child was my life; and it was an idiot. And I wept, and a hundred times I ran away, but each time I came back it had the same dreadful face. Until I thought, if I could kiss it, whatever in it was my own, perhaps I could rest. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible . . . but I kissed it.

Quentin: Does it still come back?

Helga: At times. But it somehow has the virtue now . . . of being mine. I think one must finally take one's life in one's arms, Quentin.⁵⁶

It would appear in regard to the success of Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night that audiences will allow any amount of soul-searching autobiography as long as it is kept behind the footlights in unquestionable dramatic form and is far enough removed from current headlines to avoid being embarrassing. After the Fall, however, cast in a form that must be labelled more expository than dramatic and dealing deeply not only with the author's life, but with the life and death of his very famous and recently deceased

wife, Marilyn Monroe, was more than could be accepted by many. Whatever after-taste of significance and artistry might have been derived from a performance of the work was lost through a lack of emotional distance in the audience.

Walter Kerr began, "After the Fall resembles a confessional which Arthur Miller enters as a penitent and from which he emerges as the priest,"⁵⁷ and John McClain was forthrightly offended by a "lack of taste." "--I thought the girl might have been permitted to rest in peace."⁵⁸ Norman Nadel was among the few who were able to see beyond or at least to close their eyes to any immediate vulgarity: "After the Fall is a somber, funny, tragic, and terrifying triumph of purposeful introspection."⁵⁹ Condemnation of Miller for the immediacy of his largely factual material seems rather futile, if not foolish, especially when one considers that if he wished merely to exploit his intimate knowledge of Miss Monroe, he might have done so without such an excruciating revelation of himself. Quentin is Miller, and he is working through the most serious of problems: how to recognize one's guilt and yet live, and live richly with love in the world. The material, the questions, the answers are powerful. Whether so expository a form can live in the theater, whether audiences can be drawn to find their own guilt and need for life in Quentin's dilemma must remain for future productions to demonstrate.

Nevertheless, After the Fall carries forth Miller's qualifications for the social play, even though it occupies itself so oppressively with an individual personality. As long as there is something significant for people besides Quentin in the acceptance of the discovery he makes about his own life, he can be described as a questioner representative of his people. Indeed, the guilt which he recognizes as something he must partake of, the guilt of Nazi crimes in which he must somehow share is the guilt of society, of all mankind. The realization of his personal selfishness and cruelty is only symbolic of and the

first step toward a realization of the common guilt born of humanity. Quentin discovers, with the help of Helga, that the only way to live in the world, in his society, in his polis, and with himself is to accept guilt and to move beyond it. Love is possible, for Quentin and for all men, only when one sees the truth, the ugliness, and yet says "yes" to life, takes up his idiot child, takes his life in his arms.

With the advent of the 1965 theater season, a sigh of relief must have risen from a Broadway uneasy with the agitation of Miller's 1964 offering. He was for the second time on the boards of the new Lincoln Center, and this time with a short play that, though it was again heavy with debate and light of action, was straightforward and undoubtedly fictional. Incident at Vichy takes place among men waiting to be called from a detention room in Vichy, France in 1942. Through the nervous revelation of their various hopes and anxieties, their beliefs and despair, the audience receives a stark portrayal of the terror and destruction of Nazi hate.

Von Berg, one of two gentiles among them who will be given passes of release, is a member of the Austrian aristocracy who has been deeply offended by the vulgarity of the Nazi occupation forces.

Bayard [an electrician]: In other words, if they had good taste in art, and elegant table manners, and let the orchestra play whatever it liked, they'd be all right with you.

Von Berg: But how would that be possible? Can people with respect for art go about hounding Jews? Making a prison of Europe, pushing themselves forward as a race of policemen and brutes? Is that possible for artistic people?

Monceau [an actor]: I'd like to agree with you, Prince Von Berg, but I have to say that the German audiences--I've played there--no audience is as sensitive to the smallest nuance of a performance; they sit in the theater with respect like in a church. And nobody listens to music like a German. Don't you think so? It's a passion with them.
(Pause)

Von Berg (appalled at the truth): I'm afraid that is true, yes. I don't know what to say. (He is depressed, deeply at a loss.)⁶⁰

Many such beliefs must be trampled before Leduc, a psychiatrist, and Von Berg

are left to uncover the raw truth that remains. In rebuttal to a Communistic harangue conducted by Bayard that has been silenced by the fact that, as Von Berg suggests, most Nazis are of the working class, Von Berg submits that only a few individuals are not subject to the influence of propaganda.

Bayard: You're an intelligent man, Prince. Are you seriously telling me that five, ten a thousand, ten thousand decent people of integrity are all that stand between us and the end of everything? You mean this whole world is going to hang on that thread?⁶¹

As the men are called away one by one Leduc, a stony-eyed realist, admits to Von Berg his anger at knowing the evil in the world and not having acted reasonably upon his knowledge.

I am only angry that I should have been born before the day when man has accepted his own nature; that he is not reasonable, that he is full of murder, that his ideals are only the little tax he pays for the right to hate and kill with a clear conscience. I am only angry that, knowing this, I still deluded myself. That there was not time to truly make part of myself what I know, and to teach others the truth.⁶²

At Von Berg's insistence upon a remaining idealism Leduc informs him that no one is immune from hatred and selfishness.

Each man has his Jew; it is the other. And the Jews have their Jews. And now, now above all, you must see that you have yours--the man whose death leaves you relieved that you are not him, despite your decency. And that is why there is nothing and will be nothing--until you face your own complicity with this . . . your own humanity.⁶³

And at Von Berg's helplessness in comforting the man who will be held while Von Berg goes free, Leduc utters the words that are the answer to the connection of all the preoccupation with guilt and Miller's larger purpose in surpassing it: "It's not your guilt I want, it's your responsibility--that might have helped."⁶⁴

In Leduc, Miller has given us an intelligent and honest, if selfish man, one who sees as Quentin did that the evil and guilt in the world must be accepted. The individual man must recognize the part he has in the world's evil and must do the most he can to remedy that evil if he would know the peace

that responsible acceptance brings. Leduc finds he must challenge Von Berg, the man who will not relinquish his belief in the existence of good, in the solidity of true idealism, but who comes to see the necessity for a responsible idealism, one that has realized evil. When Von Berg returns with his white pass to freedom, he shoves it at Leduc and sits quietly back on the bench to meet his death.

It seems that Miller has moved away from the "common man's" language to people his stage with characters capable of articulating his message. Perhaps those who complained most loudly of the inadequate stature of his colloquial heroes are those that are now protesting the stage as a debate platform.

Incident at Vichy is certainly not devoid of high emotions and exciting dramatic situations, as well as of vital action, and there will be those who will agree with Howard Taubman: "Arthur Miller has written a moving play, a searching play, one of the most important plays of our time. . . . It is a thundering cry of anguish and warning that might issue from the heart of a prophet."⁶⁵

With Von Berg, Miller has come round to a clearly noble and heroic questioner, one that even goes half-way towards Krutch's stipulations in being a member of an "enlightened nobility." Ironically, the effectiveness of Von Berg's action depends upon his identifying himself as a part of the polis of men called to account for their race, upon his accepting the responsibility for the evil by which these men are condemned. In taking his stony-eyed stance in the detention room from which he could so easily and righteously have escaped, Von Berg declares himself one of those few thousand people who will stand out from their society to discover for them that there is a decent, a good, a heroic way to live in the world. In his ability to so declare himself lies his, and our, victory.

It would appear that Miller's theory, as it is presented in "On Social

Plays," of what important drama--tragic drama--must be in our time is related to what he has tried to do in his dramas, and certainly provides a lucid and perhaps an elucidating frame through which to examine his work. It is apparent, also, in the nature of Mr. Miller's comments regarding any individual work, that he does not attempt, nor does he presume to convince us that he attempts to devise art from a formula.

Despite the fact that Arthur Miller has added considerable spice to the debate that surrounds him by having a great deal to say about the nature of tragedy, no one is more aware than he that his theories are after-the-fact of his plays. He has insisted, in fact, that he never knows all that his material means as he handles it, that he works with the depths of reality as it presents itself to him and must complete a work before he can begin to see its whole relevance and particular significance. "If I know what something means to me, if I have already come to the end of it as an experience, I can't write it because it seems like a twice-told tale."⁶⁶

Miller admits such a process is astonishingly costly, yet it is his manner of working. "You can go up a dead end and discover that it's beyond your capacity to find some organism underneath your feeling, and you're left simply with a formless feeling which is not itself art."⁶⁷ Arthur Miller is first an artist, an artist who has given us the benefit of his thought regarding the ideal goal and potential worth of the work he and his fellow dramatists may produce. But this truth must be the first truth of tragedy as well as of the artist: He doesn't start with principles; he begins with a facet of his experience that moves him. What evolves may or may not be good, and it may or may not be tragedy.

The discussion of Miller's individual plays has revealed that what evolves from a mind conditioned towards the social play also may or may not be good

and may or may not be tragedy. It is clear that Miller's attempt to draw a simple identity between his idea of the social play and the traditional concept of tragedy is inaccurate. Though critics will continue to exercise the argument "Is it or isn't it?" upon a few of Miller's plays, the success that any of the plays have in reaching the coveted pigeonhole will remain incidental to the aims prescribed in his theory.

In his essay, Miller has shaped some impressive tenets from the similarity between his aspirations for society and the drama and the apparent state of an ancient society and its drama. The kind of thinking that shaped these tenets has not proven irrelevant or impotent in the modern American theater. As far as information is available, none of Miller's plays has failed to reach Broadway since The Man Who Had All the Luck was produced in 1945. Whenever a Miller play has appeared, audiences have been stirred--at times to extravagant praise, at times to violent condemnation, and quite often to both extremes regarding the same play. When a Miller play appears, chances are that audiences will feel themselves compelled to affirm or deny some vital principle of living, and no such compulsion could be aroused if the principle were not delivered in a dramatic form effectively molded for its purposes. Critics have often welcomed Miller plays with extra-professional warmth, gliding blindly over artistic failings in their gratitude for contemporary American plays that "say something important."

Miller's own theory suffers from the same gliding over or even ignoring of dramatic principles other than subject and purpose-effect. In his description of the social play Miller has neglected to indicate anything about how this meaningful drama will be effected, anything, in fact, about drama as an artistic form. He speaks in lofty phrases about the elevating effect the action of a social play will have upon an audience adequately primed to perceive

its significance, but he fails to describe what he means and doesn't mean by "action," how action is presented in a drama, how it is perceived by the theater audience, or what place action holds in relation to other parts of dramatic form such as dialogue, characterization, theme, and subject. The list of "left-outs" could continue until all aspects of structure ever considered by dramatic analysis had been enumerated. In short, however, Miller has formulated a theory that considers only a few aspects of drama and that, as a result, is not capable of fully evaluating his plays or anyone else's even as drama, let alone as tragedy.

Miller's shortcomings as a systematic theorist may well present themselves as assets to his expansive growth as a dramatist. Even the briefest assay of his plays displays the explorative and versatile mind of an experimenter at work. All My Sons establishes a novice's success in the imitation of a standard form of plot-making. Death of a Salesman two years later must be acknowledged as the work of an inventive master; the intriguing form developed to dramatically relate the operation of a disturbed man's mind utilized imaginative directing, setting and technical effects to create a startling dramatic illusion. The Crucible reveals Miller exercising archaic speech and a traditional form in the creation of a play that has seldom failed to strike with a powerful impact. A View From the Bridge carves from a New York waterfront neighborhood teeming with sweat and passion the lyric overtones of an ancient civilization, weaving into the muddled cries of confused humanity the musings of an articulate chorus-commentator. After the Fall is an experiment in area setting, episodic staging, and expository delivery which some critics have declined to grant the name of drama. (Yet, we must recall that it does fulfill the qualifications of Miller's theory.) Incident at Vichy, starkly limited in its setting, time and action, displays the range of humanity moving

in and out of the debate of its life, a debate that terminates with a simple sacrificial action.

Perhaps such an ardent experimenter would say that every drama must find its own form, and no doubt for his own purposes this view is best. However, just as an analysis of Miller's plays through his theory cannot distinguish those plays with tragic potential, just as it fails to point out artistic deficiencies, so it cannot begin to acknowledge anything that is outstanding amidst his variety of dramatic forms. If Miller's excursions in form have been a "sometime thing," his ideas, ideals, and purposes have followed a steady and expanding path that may be easily traced with the help of his stated intention in "On Social Plays."

We have observed changing tendencies through the progress of Miller's work as well as seeing more or less established ideas about drama in action. His belief in the "necessary" discoveries has remained, while the nature of those discoveries has developed with his developing philosophy. Particularly, it is possible to trace the development of his thought regarding guilt. How these ideas and Miller's dramatic form will advance beyond 1965 is a revelation to be eagerly awaited. Whether all of the components that are blended in the creation of a work of art will in Miller's case be worthy of the coveted cry "tragedy" is a question for all our sons.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," NYT (Feb. 27, 1949), sec. 2, pp. 1, 3.

² Arthur Miller, "On Social Plays," intro. to A View From the Bridge (New York, 1955), p. 1.

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹² Ibid., p. 6.

¹³ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

²² David Daiches, The Novel and the Modern World (Chicago, 1939), pp. 3-4.

²³ Herbert Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy (New York, 1956), pp. 54-55.

²⁴ Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," Atlantic, CXCVII (April 1956), p. 41.

- 25 Arthur Miller, Collected Plays (New York, 1957), p. 13.
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ARTHUR MILLER: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ARTHUR MILLER: THEORY AND PRACTICE

As well as having established himself as one of the most important of American contemporary dramatists, Arthur Miller has frequently contributed material to the analytical and critical discussion of drama. This paper will undertake the application of Miller's plays to his single complete presentation of a theory of drama.

Miller's essay "On Social Plays" describes his ideal social play as rising from the kind of social situation that produces tragedy (such as the ancient Greek polis) and as being identical in purpose and effect to that sought-after phenomenon. He finds the essence of tragedy to be its manner of social expression; tragic victory is attained when the polis (the whole community or social unit) discovers, through the action of their representative questioner or tragic hero, some truth in the "Grand Design" that indicates the right way for them to live together. Miller feels that there is hope for this kind of social drama-tragedy in our time, but that our society must first take on the characteristics of the ancient polis: that is, each man must be important within the social unit.

A consideration of Miller's All My Sons (1947), Death of a Salesman (1949), The Crucible (1953), A View From the Bridge (1955), After the Fall (1964), and Incident at Vicky (1965), reveals that each of the plays does fulfill the stipulations of Miller's theory, but public receptions indicate that while most of the plays occasion the impassioned praise and blame that follow significant statements about life only a few attain the precarious balance of those modern works tossed about in the debate: Is it or is it not tragedy? Though Miller's concepts as presented in "On Social Plays" and traditional concepts of tragedy are not antithetical and may in some cases express identical qualities, tragedy

does not necessarily result from conformance to the stipulations of "On Social Plays."

Although the theory provides a lucid and perhaps an elucidating frame through which to examine Miller's work--his stated intention for drama in practice, the gradual development and refinement of his philosophy--it also suffers from a gliding over or even ignoring of dramatic principles other than subject and purpose-effect. Consequently, just as an analysis of Miller's plays through his theory cannot distinguish those plays with tragic potential, just as it fails to point out artistic deficiencies, so it cannot begin to acknowledge anything that is outstanding amidst his rich variety of dramatic forms.