The Angst That Wealth Begets

Memory keeps folding in upon itself like geological layers of rock, the deeper strata sometimes appearing on top before they slope downward into the depths again.

- Miller, *Timebends*
The Angst that Wealth Begets

In 1970s Miller wrote his new play, *The American Clock*, set during the United States's Great Depression at the end of the 1920s. “It seemed an odd moment to turn the clock back”, says Christopher Bigsby in his recent article, “I asked him why he had written the play at this time. He replied that he wanted to remind people that it could all go away. ... Miller never forgot the Depression. As he told me it was ‘his time’” (Bigsby, “Arthur Miller: depression’s fortune”). He lived through it from the age of 14 until war finally rebooted the economy when he was in his mid-20s. The Great Depression is the shadow behind *Death of a Salesman*. It is a presence in *A Memory of Two Mondays* and *The American Clock*. Miller says in his “Introduction” to the play:

> We seemed to have lost awareness of community, of what we rightfully owe each other and what we owe ourselves. There seemed a want of any historical sense. ...I had no prophecy of doom in mind, although in sheer principle it seemed impossible that the market could keep rising indefinitely. ... I wanted to try to show how it was and where we had come from. I wanted to give some sense of life as we lived it when the clock was ticking away every day (xiii-xiv).

A few years after the successful production of the play in London in 1980, it all nearly did go away.

As the lights come on to the stage, we see Miller’s broad canvas, his backdrop “an impression of the geography of the United States” (361) suggesting the
magnitude of the great American calamity, the greatest calamity that befell the 
country that “knelt to a golden calf in a blanket of red, white, and blue.” (361).
In this “surrounding vastness” appears the Baum family, reminiscent of Miller’s
own family in late 1920s, placed against the mural of some thirty-five sketched-
in victims, from the farmlands of Central America to the Streets of New York.
The play’s narrator, Lee Baum, ranks the Great Depression as one of the two
truly national disasters, the other being the Civil War, which touched everyone;
and not the World Wars or Vietnam. Throughout the play Miller gives us
snapshots of Depression stories from diverse segments of the society formed
into a collage, very much like the opening chapter of his autobiography,
Timebends.

The play begins with the ritual chant of all Americans of all ages by the Baums,
“By the summer of 1929 … I think it’s fair to say that nearly every American …
Firmly believed that he was going to get … Richer and richer … Every year.”
(361). In contrast to that, the seventy year old co-narrator, Robertson warns the
shoeshine man, who with forty-five dollars cash to his name has purchased one
hundred thousand dollars worth of stock, of a market crash. Clarence, the
shoeshine man and the other stockholders, all of them products of the American
optimism do not believe him for they believe in the myth of the American
success. Lee makes a reference to this myth when he says, “Up to ’29 it was the
age of belief” (363).

Rose Baum, like Miller’s own mother flaunts her diamond jewelry, lives in an
eleven-room apartment in Park Avenue, and moves about in a chauffer-driven
car “to see Kern or Gershwin or Herbert, which she will play the next morning
on the Knabe baby grand, and sing in the happy, slightly hooting soprano so
proper and romantic and fashionable” (Timebends, 4). Moe, the successful
businessman, very much like Miller’s father “who has built one of the two or
three largest coat manufacturing business in the country at the time and who
cannot read or write any language” (Timebends, 4), keeps investing his money in
the stock market. The grandfather, again a replica of Miller’s own grandpa,
cannot live in the small house in the Brooklyn countryside for he does not have
enough space to keep his innumerable hats and canes there. The most practical
of the lot Lee, like Miller pulls out his savings of twelve dollars just at the break
of the crash and buys a bike. A little later Lee reports:

Lee: The bank has just been closed by the government! It’s
broke! There’s a whole mob of people in the street yelling
where’s their money! They’ve got cops and everything! There is
no more money in the bank!

Rose: You’re a genius!

Lee: Imagine! … I could have lost my twelve dollars! … wow!

(381)

Robertson continues his task of warning people but very few heed to his
counsel. He advises Dr. Rosman to sell his stock and buy gold bars for “the
dollar may disappear with the rest of it” (368) and not to “put them in the bank”
(369). The basement or the pair of shoes one is wearing is safer than the security
of the financial institutions! The narrator recounts many more scenes of the bad
times, the signs of which he had seen long back when he found, “the
warehouses are overflowing, we can’t move the goods” (368). He tells us, Jesse
Livermore, William Durant, Arthur Clayton, Randolph Morgan, “the fabled
High Priests of the never-ending Boom” (371) are all in trouble. But their
optimism, their faith in the Myth of American success does not allow them to
see the obvious even at the eleventh hour. They stand as pillars of hope only to
fall into an abyss of despair.

Tony: Everybody should get down on their knees and thank John
D. Rockefeller. ... I mean, there’s a man – to come out like that
with the whole market falling to pieces and say, “I and my sons
are buying six million dollars in common stocks” I mean, that’s a
bullfighter.

Livermore: He’ll turn it all around, too.

Tony: Sure he’ll turn it around, because the man’s a capitalist, he
knows how to put up a battle. You wait, tomorrow morning it’ll
all be shooting up again like Roman candles! (370)

Diana: It seems that Daddy’s lived on loans the last few months
and his credit stopped. I had no idea! I feel like a figure in a
dream. I sat down in the dining car the other day, absolutely
famished, and realized I had only forty cents! I am surviving on
chocolate bars! Whatever has become of all the money?

Livermore: You musn’t worry Miss Morgan, there’ll soon be
plenty of money. Money is like a shy bird: the slightest rustle in
the trees and it flies for cover. But money cannot bear solitude
for long, it must come out and feed. And that is we must all
speak positively and show our confidence. (372)
Durant: If I were you, Miss Morgan, I would prepare myself for the worst.

Livermore: Now, Bill, there is no good in that kind of talk. (372)

Even at the face of the crisis they keep fooling themselves and others. But soon after Durant loses control over General Motors; Randolph Morgan, Diana’s father, is found throwing himself out of his window as the Morgan Bank collapses; and Jesse Livermore, “who had four hundred and eighty million dollars in common stocks” (374) five weeks earlier, borrowed five thousand dollars from Robertson, retuned it in a few days, went to the washroom of Sherry-Netherland hotel and shot himself.

The picture is similar in the Baum household as the market falls, for Moe had put “too much capital in the stock market, -- it made more there than in his business” (381). Rose starts mortgaging her jewelry one by one in the pawnshop. The initial optimism that, “things’l1 pick up in a month or two” (376), gradually fades away. The family is forced to cut down on its splurging habits. The first one to go was the chauffer:

Moe: I never paid no attention to these things, but maybe you heard of the market crash? The whole thing practically floated into the ocean, y’know.

Frank: oh, yes, sir, I certainly heard about it.

Moe: I’m glad you heard about it, because I heard a lot about it. In fact, what you cleared from selling my tires over the last ten years ...
Frank: Oh, no, sir! Mr. Baum!

Moe: Frank, lookin’ back over the last ten years, I never heard of that amount of tires in my whole life since I first come over from Europe a baby at the age of six. That is a lot of tires, Frank; so I tell ya what we’re gonna do now, you’re going to drive her to the Pierce Arrow showroom and leave her there, and then come to my office and we’ll settle up.

Frank: But how are you going to get around!

Moe: I’m a happy man in a taxi, Frank. (378)

Soon after goes the car, the apartment overlooking Central Park and the family shifts to a Brooklyn house where Lee and Grandpa has to share a bedroom. Of all in the family Grandpa is the worst hit in spirit and keeps complaining about the discomforts. He represents the old time brutal business ethics that did not care for others:

Grandpa: I don’t understand, Rose – why does he declare bankruptcy if he’s going to turn around and pay his debts?

Rose: For his reputation.

Grandpa: His reputation! He’ll have the reputation of a fool! The reason to go bankrupt is not to pay your debts!

Rose: He wanted to be honourable.

Grandpa: But that’s the whole beauty of it! He should have asked me. When I went bankrupt I didn’t pay nobody! (379-380)
Miller introduces tragic vignettes of the Depression – farmers losing their lands, girls taking up prostitution, students unwilling to leave college campus fearing unemployment, starving men looking out for odd jobs, boys forced to marry daughters of their landlords for a rent-free apartment – the list goes on. Robertson reports:

Robertson: Nobody knows how many people are leaving their hometowns, their farms and cities, and hitting the road. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of internal refugees, Americans transformed into strangers. (386) ...

I guess the most shocking thing is what I see from the window of my Riverside Drive apartment. It's Calcutta on the Hudson, thousands of people living in cardboard boxes right next to that beautiful drive. It is like an army encampment down the length of Manhattan Island. At night you see their campfire flickering, and some nights I go down and walk among them. Remarkable, the humour they still have, but of course people still blame themselves rather than the government. But there's never been a society that hasn't had a clock running on it, and you can't help wondering – how long? How long will they stand for this? (402)

The world is shattered, no doubt, "yet amid the ensuing suffering the entire American population seems content to await a return to prosperity without evaluating the roots of its insubstantiality. What needs to occur, that populace seems to conclude, is for someone or something to return us to that old order", says William W. Demastes (Biggsby, Companion, 150). They suffer and wait hopefully for things to change. Ironically it is the war that makes things change.
but till then everybody waits – almost like “Waiting for Godot”. Like Grandpa, people think, “In Europe they starve, but here not. Anyway, couple weeks they’re going to figure out what to do, and you can forget the whole thing” (392). The others too wait:

Mrs. Taylor: Like weather: had to expect bad weather, but it always got good again if you waited. And so we waited. And it didn’t change. … and we waited some more and it never changed. You couldn’ hardly believe that a day would come when the land wouldn’t give. Land always gives. But there it lay, miles and miles of it, and there was us wanting to work it, and couldn’t. (382)

Optimism and hope is all that pulled them through the terrible times – hoping and waiting for things to change was all that they could afford. Lee records the time when he and his father sat pretending that everything was normal at a time when the family was practically living on relief:

Lee: We went down to the subway together, and it was hard to look at one another. So, we pretended that nothing had happened. … and before I knew it I was inventing a fantastic future! I said I’d be going to college in no more than a year, at most two; and that I’d straighten out my mind and become an A student; and then I’d not only get a job on a newspaper, but I’d have my own column, no less! By the time we got to Forty-Second Street, the Depression was practically over! (404)
Miller’s political ideology leans towards the democrats. He regards President Roosevelt as the greatest US President ever, and scoffs at the Republicans for not preventing the Depression. In the discussion between Taylor and the Baums, Miller relates the socio-political situation of the nation.

Lee: They nearly lynched a judge for auctioning off their farms. (To Taylor, impressed) Were you in that?
Taylor: Well, it’s all over now, but I don’t believe they’ll be auctioning any more farms for a while, though. Been just terrible out there.
Rose: And I thought they were all Republicans in Iowa.
Taylor: Well, I guess they all are.
Lee: Is that what they mean by radical, though?
Taylor: Well… it’s like they say – people in Iowa are practical. They’ll even go radical if it seems like it’s practical. But as soon as it stops being practical they stop being radical. (390)

Miller’s disdain for the money-grabbing capitalism is given expression through Ted Quinn’s speech when he is about to resign from GE. “Ted Quinn, a champion of democracy, an opponent of monopolies, and President-designee of General Electric” (Bigsby, Companion, 159), as June Schlueter calls him, is closer to Miller in ideology than any other business giant of the time. Miller knew Quinn personally and believed like him that the process of cartelization was the biggest threat to Democracy.

Robertson: Exactly and GE is the fastest-growing company in the world because …
Quinn: ... because we've had the capital to buy up one independent business after another. ...it's haunting me, Arthur – thousands of small businesses are going down every week now, and we're getting bigger and bigger every day. What's going to become of the independent person in this country once everybody's sucking off the same tit? How can there be America without Americans – people not beholden to some enormous enterprise that'll run their souls?...

I don't believe in giant business, or giant government, or giant anything. ...

Graham: What are your plans? Will you join another company or Quinn: No. I've been tickling the idea I might set up an advisory service for small business. Say a fella has a concept, I could teach him how to develop it and market it ... 'cause I know all that, and maybe I could help – to keep those individuals coming.

Because with the terrible Depression you hear it everywhere now – an individual man is not worth a bag of peanuts. I don't know the answers, Mr. Graham, but I sure as hell know the question: How do you keep everything that's big from swallowing everything that's small? 'Cause when that happens — God almighty – it's not going to be much fun! (395-398)

Herbert Hoover once said somewhere, 'Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt' (Prochnow, 120). In Miller's play it is the young that is most pathetically affected as the narrator tells us, "a whole generation was withering in the best years of its life" (420). Lee cannot afford to go to college
for “all these years we were throwing money around and now” (399) when he needs it, they cannot afford it. Generations together had made wrong choices which finally led to this angst stricken chaos. The phrase, “all the years we had so much, and now when you need it” (403) has become a refrain in everything Rose tells Lee. Sidney, Lee’s relative, faces an ordeal which is even worse:

Fanny: It’s all up to you, Sidney, I want you to make up your own mind. ... Mrs. Gross says - she’s a widow, y’know? And with her goiter and everything ...

Sidney: What?

Fanny: If you like Doris – only if you like her – and you would agree to get married – when she’s eighteen, about, or seventeen, even – if you would agree to it now, we could have this apartment rent-free. Starting next month.

Sidney: Forever?

Fanny: Of course. You would be the husband, it would be your house. You’d move downstairs, with that grand piano and the tile shower ...I even think if you’d agree she’d throw in the three months’ back rent that we owe. I wouldn’t even be surprised you could take over the bakery.

Sidney: The bakery! For God’s sake, Mama, I’m a composer!...

Fanny: ... I only hope that four, five years from now you don’t accidentally run into Doris Gross somewhere and fall in love with her – after we all died from exposure! (401)
Lee finally gets to the university “after a lot of jobs and saving” (406), but as Robertson says the generation that was coming of age would never feel the sense of opportunity. There were courses in the university but no jobs after that. Some stayed on in the university for the sake of their “root canals”. “If I just take one university course I’m still entitled to the Health Service – could get my canals finished” (407), says one of them. As Lee and Joe and the innumerable unemployed youth look at the working of the world’s richest nation the only thing that hits them hard is disillusionment. They see signs of unrest and frustration everywhere. Lee cries out in desperation:

Lee: And the anger, the anger ...when they were handing out meat and beans to the hungry, and the maggots wriggling out of the beef, and that man pointing his rifle at the butcher demanding the fresh meat the government had paid him to hand out ... how could this have happened, is Marx right? Paper says twelve executives in tobacco have made more than thirty thousand farmers who raised it. How long can they accept this? The anger has a smell, it hangs in the air wherever people gather...Fights suddenly break out and simmer down. Is this when revolution comes? And why not? ... Armed deputies guarding cornfields and whole families sitting beside the road, staring at that food which nobody can buy and is rotting on the stalk. It’s insane. (408)

And Joe exclaims in fear:

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Joe: I get the feeling every once in a while that some bright morning millions of people are going to come pouring out of the building and just ... I don't know what ... kill each other?(409)

Even at the face of this great calamity the nation could not give up its old habit of indulging in excesses. It was a bundle of contradictions then as Robertson tells us:

Robertson: I did a lot of walking back in those days, and the contrasts were startling. Along the West Side of Manhattan you had eight or ten of the world's greatest ocean liners tied up – I recall the SS Manhattan, the Berengaria, the United States – most of them would never sail again. But at the same time they were putting up the Empire State Building, highest in the world. But with whole streets and avenues of empty stores who would ever rent space in it?(420)

The Depression had, no doubt, affected the nation as well as the world. There was an urgent need not only to find ways of getting out of the crisis but to do something as Toland in the play humoursly puts it, “Whoever you talk to, ‘I used-ta.’ If they don’t do something, I tell ya, one of these days this used-ta be a country” (422).

But did the Depression only bring in suffering and no insights to ruminate over? Did the experience not juxtapose the excesses of the American life in the boom-time, with the devastating effects of the down turn in all the segments of the society? Was it not the choice made by a whole generation in terms of acquiring
and expending of wealth that finally lead to the crisis? Probably, yes. But the irony is that when it fell, when it all went away it did not differentiate between person and person. Like "Death the Leveler" it struck all. The young and the old, the affluent and the not-so affluent became a victim of this national disaster. Miller records the impact of the harrowing experience on the individual as well as the nation as a whole, in his "Introduction" to the play:

With all its variety, however, there were certain features of the Depression era that set it apart, for they had not existed before in such force and over such a long time. One of the most important of these to me, both as a person living through those years and as a writer contemplating them three decades afterwards, was the introduction into the American psyche of a certain unprecedented suspense. ... But the Crash forced us all to enter history willy-nilly, and everyone soon understood that there were other ways of conducting the nation's business – there simply had to be, because the one we had was so persistently not working (xiii).

In late 1930s the anguished cry of the American Everyman was, "It can't go on forever,... a country can't just die!" (441). And the country just didn't die. The war saved the nation from the clutches of one death and threw it into the clutches of another form of degeneration. The war lifted the country from its gloom into the most successful nation of the world. America was once again the 'El Dorado' of the world. 1949 was no different from 1915, they were the boom times, times when the expectation was that every year the personal and family economic situation would improve along with the improved fiscal condition of
the nation. Every year a better, than the previous one. Day by day, year by year, the nation grew into the world's number one Capitalist Consumerist nation. Miller tells us in his conversation with Studs Terkel, “In the booming Fifties, Humphries, Eisenhower's Secretary of Treasury, was interviewed. Could it happen again? He said that, of course, it could, because they didn't know why it happened the first time” (310). What then did this grave economic crisis that went on for so long, teach us? Nothing? Probably, this is the reason why Miller chose to recollect his terrifying experiences of 1929 and the decade after that in play after play, to warn us that “it can all go away” again.

Today, we all know, The American Clock is ticking away, the wind is rising, and we may be in for another big blow. President Barack Obama, in his speech to a joint session of Congress on Feb. 24, 2009 said:

I know that for many Americans watching right now, the state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others. And rightly so. If you haven't been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has -- a friend; a neighbor; a member of your family. You don't need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in crisis, because you live it every day. It's the worry you wake up with and the source of sleepless nights. It's the job you thought you'd retire from but now have lost; the business you built your dreams upon that's now hanging by a thread; the college acceptance letter your child had to put back in the envelope. The impact of this recession is real, and it is everywhere. (Obama)
Another report records the extent of the economic crisis of 2008-2009 and its impact in the history of the world and America:

The rubber has finally hit the road. A generation who’s hallmark was greed, self-absorption and excess have been brought to their knees. Thirty years of instant gratification created the largest accumulation of personal debt in history; Eighteen months of falling house prices and imploding stock markets have washed it away. With that flood have gone the dreams and aspirations of the generations who bore them and the ones they brought into this world (Flynn).

The illustrious baby boom generation spent most of their adult lives striving to create a level of wealth and comfort unimagined by the earlier generations. The replacement for the hard earned cash of their parent’s generation was instant credit which was one of the major causes for the fall. It is recorded that the “US household debt hit 13.9 trillion dollars in the third quarter of 2008, up from 1.1 trillion dollars in 1978” (Flynn).

In the face of an imminent world-wide disaster, what then is the responsibility of each one of us, the citizens of the world? What then, do we owe to the citizens of the world, yet to be born? Is each one of us responsible for the collective angst of the world? If we do not have the answers to these questions that Miller’s play brings to our minds in the present time, there will be the same anxious cry from every corner of the world, and this time it will certainly be much more frightening for we live in a world much closer and “flatter” today – in a world which is much more interdependent than it ever was.