This desire to move on, to metamorphose or perhaps it is a talent for being contemporary was given me as life's inevitable and rightful condition. To keep becoming, always to stay involved in transition.
- Miller, *Timebends*. 

*Arthur Miller, and* 

*Existential Angst in Literature*
Arthur Miller, and Existential Angst in Literature

Arthur Asher Miller, the son of a women's clothing company owner, was born in 1915 in New York City. His father lost his business in the Depression and the family was forced to move to a smaller home in Brooklyn. After graduating from high school, Miller worked jobs ranging from radio singer to truck driver to clerk in an automobile-parts warehouse. Miller began writing plays as a student at the University of Michigan, joining the Federal Theater Project in New York City after he received his degree. His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, opened in 1944 and his next play, *All My Sons*, received the Drama Critics' Circle Award. His 1949 *Death of a Salesman* won the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1956 and 1957, Miller was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee and was convicted of contempt of Congress for his refusal to identify writers believed to hold Communist sympathies. The following year, the United States Court of Appeals overturned the conviction. In 1959 the National Institute of Arts and Letters awarded him the Gold Medal for Drama. Miller has been married three times: to Mary Grace Slattery in 1940, Marilyn Monroe in 1956, and photographer Inge Morath in 1962, with whom he lived in Connecticut. He and Inge had a daughter, Rebecca. Miller's writing has earned him a lifetime of honors, including the Pulitzer Prize, seven Tony Awards, two Drama Critics Circle Awards, an Obie, an Olivier, the John F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Dorothy and Lillian Gish prize. He holds honorary doctorate degrees from Oxford University and Harvard University. Miller passed away on 10 February 2005 at his Connecticut home.
Arthur Miller is one of the five leading playwrights of the American theatre; the others being Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. Of the five of them only O'Neil’s renowned status grew over a long period of time. Each of the other four was granted an instantaneous repute of a major playwright with the professional production of their first or second full-length play. For Wilder it was the first production of Our Town in 1938; Williams, The Glass Menagerie, second, in 1945; Miller, All My Sons, second, in 1947; and Albee, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, first, in 1962. In 1949, when Death of a Salesman was produced for the first time, Miller was considered as one of the world’s most important living dramatists. An instant international fame is a heavy burden for any artist, more so when one is at the early stages of his artistic career. But young Miller knew how to cope with such an achievement, for not very long ago had he seen the other extreme of life; the adversity that the Depression brought to his prosperous family. He knew how fame, like wealth was transitory.

The theatre of America before O'Neill, Miller and Williams did not have a dramatist of international standard to reckon with. The only masters that they had as their models were the European ones. The post-war American dramatic scene was dominated by Williams and Miller, the former inspired by Strindberg; the latter by Ibsen. Both the dramatists echoed the ills of the American system of economic, social and political life.

Miller’s theatrical works, spanning over six decades from 1944 to 2002, can be classified in to three periods for the sake of convenience. Robert W. Corrigan names the first two periods of Miller’s dramatic career after the periods of psychological crisis in a man’s life. According to that he calls the first period as crises of Identity
which corresponds with the period of youth. The earliest plays of Miller fall under this category. In the early plays – *The Man Who Had All Luck* (1944), *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *An Enemy of the People* (1950), *The Crucible* (1953), *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955), *A View From the Bridge* (1955 & 1957) – most of the central characters are confronted with an identity crises. Strangely enough, Joe Keller, Willy Loman, John Proctor and Eddie Carbone, are all caught up in a problem of identity asking the same question, “Who am I?”

The plays that Miller wrote during the next period, called the period of crises of Generativity by Corrigan correspond with the middle part of his life. The four major plays of the period, *The Misfits* (1957), *After the Fall* (1964), *Incident at Vichy* (1965), and *The Price* (1968); and a collection of short stories, *I Don't Need You Any More* (1967); deal with the crises of conscience according to Corrigan where the protagonist is concerned not with his identity but with his relationship with others.

The last phase in a man’s psychological life is called the period of crises of Integrity, which is one of maturity. If I can call the last thirty years of Miller’s dramatic career the period of Integrity then the plays that he wrote during this phase were: *The Creation of the World and other Business* (1973), *The Archbishop’s Ceiling* (1976), *The American Clock* (1980), *Two-Way Mirror* (1982), *Danger, Memory!* (1987), *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991), *The Last Yankee* (1993), *The Broken Glass* (1993), *Mr. Peter’s Connections* (1998), and *Resurrection Blues* (2002). The works of this period deal with a broader perspective, with problems connected to the society and the world at large.

“For the creation of a masterwork of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment” asserts Matthew Arnold in his critical essay,
‘The Function of Criticism at the Present time’ (Arnold, 2: 20). For Miller the great literary masters that influenced him, the socio-cultural milieu that America offered him, and his own experience of life and the world around him, provided him with ‘the power of the moment’.

Miller’s great mentor was Ibsen. He very frankly acknowledges the influence of this great master on his early works in his “Introduction” to the Collected Plays. The impact of the Jed Harris production of A Doll’s House on young Miller’s mind had a lasting impact. Only when he watched Ibsen did he know that all that he had written till then, about a dozen plays, were only compilations of many scenes but not a complete play. Ibsen’s ability to forge a play upon factual bedrock inspired Miller all through his dramatic career. “I take it as a truth,” Miller says in his “Introduction”, “that the end of drama is the creation of a higher consciousness and not merely a subjective attack upon the audience’s nerves and feelings. What is precious in the Ibsen method is its insistence upon valid causation” (21). Ibsen echoes the Greek’s tragic sense of causality, which is later echoed by Miller. This Ibsenesque causal linkage provides the two fundamental building blocks of Miller’s critical method: meaning and history. Similar to Ibsen’s conservative-tragic sense, Miller’s is always “unveiling a truth already known but unrecognized as such” (11).

The other literary influences on Miller were the Greek dramatists, Sophocles and Euripides; Shakespeare; and the Russian masters, Dostoevsky and Chekhov. Miller writes in “Tragedy and the Common Man”, “From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his ‘rightful’ position in his society” (Theatre Essays, 4). Inspired by the Greeks and Shakespeare he attempted to write the Tragedy of the Common Man, whom he
considered as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* impressed Miller, he knew not why, when he read it in his high school days; but later realized that the father and son conflict in the novel interested him. Chekhov’s balance in his plays, a quality in which he was closest to Shakespeare, was most striking for Miller. “There is less distortion by the exigencies of the telescoping of time in the theatre, there is less stacking of the cards, there is less fear of the ridiculous, there is less fear of the heroic” (*Theatre Essays*, 182) asserts Miller in “The Shadows of the Gods” about Chekhov’s works.

The other major influence on Miller was the Depression which he regards as one of the two national catastrophes of America, the other being the Civil War. “The depression was my book” (*Theatre Essays*, 177), says Miller in his “The Shadows of the Gods”. The impact of the Depression was traumatizing: “there were three suicides on the little block where we lived. They couldn’t cope. The impact was incalculable. These people were profound believers in the American dream. The day money stopped their identity was gone. ... I don’t think America ever got over the Depression” recollects Miller in his 1995 Interview with Christopher Bigsby (Bigsby, *Companion*, 1). His family was badly affected by the depression; the family business was gone, along with the stocks and shares. It nearly ended plans for his education. He later earned his way to the university through a series of odd jobs, including delivering bread at four in the morning for four dollars a week. Certainly there is an echo of the depression in almost all his plays for the experience had left an indelible impression in his psyche, and a life time lesson, “everything is ephemeral. It is going to blow away, except what a person is and what a relationship is”, as he recounts decades later to Bigsby in 1995 (Bigsby, *Companion*, 1).
Miller's plays are grounded in a historical perception as he desires “to write so that people of common sense would mistake my play for life itself and not be required to lend it some poetic license before it could be believed” (Collected Plays, 19). His great fear for America is, “we don't have any past anymore” and to have no real awareness of a continuity with the past is to have no real culture, to be “invisible in [my] one's own land” (Timebends, 589). In America, as Bigsby puts it in his “Introduction” to The Portable Arthur Miller, “the past is sentimentalized, transformed into icon, domesticated into theme parks, but not seen as the key to private and public experience” (xxxvii). Europe, in contrast, has its own myths and history that offers a different perspective of human nature. The past bears more directly and obviously on the present there than it does in America. For in America the rejection of history was the motivational force behind its very settlement and remains central to the American psyche. America leans to the future in pursuit of a Dream. As against this popular trend, Miller, in almost all his plays looked to the past and recreated history.

The “American Dream” was born even before the Founding Fathers declared that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights like Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Ever since then America has been the symbol of the “Dream” of the prosperous new world and a new civilization of a class-less society. Men and women of all races and nations have flocked to America in pursuit of that “Dream”. Over the centuries many European travelers have been to America and have recorded their observations about this great nation. I wish to mention a few here, in order to bring to light a different America as documented in the impersonal records of Alex de Tocqueville, sent to America by the French Government to study the democratic form of government in 1835; Charles Dickens who recorded his
observations of his visit in *American Notes* (1842); the remarks of the Polish writer Henry Sienkiewicz, author of the Nobel prize-winning novel, *Quo Vadis*, who traveled across America between 1876 and '78; and Albert Camus, the French Nobel laureate who visited America in 1946.

The first thing that strikes Tocqueville, the earliest of the four travelers, is the prodigious power and authority that the majority enjoys in America, with the result that standardized opinion enjoys absolute popularity among the citizens, so much so that the majority is intolerant of any dissenting opinion. “I know of no other country,” Tocqueville remarks in despair, “in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America... a nation where democratic institutions exist, organized like those of the United States, there is but one authority, one element of strength and success, with nothing beyond it” (Choudhury, 24). There is a hectic rush for greater degree of wealth and comfort among all Americans and this remains the ultimate goal of everything that they ever do. He further records that “this pursuit of material welfare hardly brings contentment, and the American is harassed by a vague dread that constantly torments him lest he should not have chosen the shortest path” (Choudhury, 25) which may lead him to wealth. The French observer very interestingly remarks that virtue itself is admired not because of its moral beauty, but because it is useful and materially advantageous.

Charles Dickens came to Boston first, visited the poor house, prison, lunatic asylum and was amazed at the humane management of the public institutions. He admired the “frank, brave, cordial, hospitable and affectionate” nature of the Americans; but was deeply pained to see the treatment meted out to the Blacks. Dickens also noted “the love of smart dealing in business which gilds over many a swindle and gross breach
of trust, many a defalcation, public and private,” (Choudhury, 30) and he connects it with another characteristic of the Americans which he terms “Universal Distrust”, born of selfishness and greed.

Sienkiewicz was highly impressed by the vitality of the Americans and their respect for labour. He says, “Everywhere people look to ‘tomorrow’. Yesterday to them means only deserts, primeval forests, and the vast silence of the prairies” (Choudhury, 31). The Polish visitor, however, could not appreciate the American craze for money, nor did he admire the hectic rush of the American city life. To him New York was, “business, business, business, from morning till night ... with agitated faces and movements the citizens rush about feverishly as though they had taken leave of their senses. Wealth is the chief criterion by which men are measured... people do not say a man has a certain amount of money, but that he is worth so many thousands” (Choudhury, 32). What surprises him the most is the fact that the Americans are more interested in tangible activity than in abstract contemplation, such questions as the origin of the Universe, the existence of the Creator, the immortality of the soul, questions “which are agitating the minds of European youth, philosophers and the intelligentsia ... have no weight here” (Choudhury, 33).

Almost sixty years later Albert Camus visited America and he had “profoundly ambivalent feelings about the then rising superpower”, says Ramachandra Guha in The Hindu Magazine (Guha, 3). On the one hand, he was attracted to the drive and ingenuity of the Americans; on the other, some what repelled by what he saw as their cultural philistinism. From his talks with ordinary folk, he decided that the secret of conversation in America is to speak in order to say nothing. After a few weeks he was impatient with the “polite meaningless words” he was forced to exchange with them
only to “rediscover the flaws and defects of Europe, where conversations have wit, even nasty wit, irony, loftiness, passion, and lies” (Guha, 3). Camus contrasted the pessimism of Europeans with the optimism of Americans, for whom life was good and for some it was even marvelous.

My intention in quoting these records is only to focus on a perspective of America, different from the ones we generally get from the acknowledged sources of American history, and not with derogatory motives. In to this background, we place Miller, the son of a Jewish Austrian father and an American born Jewish mother, who has lived through decades of remarkable experiences. Miller lived in this society, struggled through the Depression, got an education funded by self, laboured for almost ten years in play writing and all of a sudden became famous with the production of *All My Sons* in 1947. The task that he accomplished then was of tremendous importance. Miller lived and wrote in a country not vibrant with “a current of true and fresh ideas” (Arnold, 2: 28) as Arnold puts it, like Shakespeare’s England or Goethe’s Germany. The material upon which Miller built his works was his own experiences of life, the people and the world around. The McCarthy era; the civil rights struggle or the too-frequent assassinations; the great jazz or big band era; the golden ages of radio, television, film, and, even theater; Watergate; the construction and destruction of the Berlin Wall; World War II, Korea, and Vietnam; the Holocaust; the rise and fall of so many governments, democracies – all these have been Miller’s rich source of raw material. With these Miller wrote play after play not celebrating the American “Success Dream”; but in most cases the failure of that dream. It needed a tremendous mental strength and courage coupled with extremely effective ideas to achieve this.
In the sixty years between 1940s and 2000, Miller has engaged in a debate with America and its values, and staged the struggle of men and women anxious to understand their lives and to insist on their significance. “He has been compelled to remember our past, and by not forgetting, to inform” (Houghton) remarks James Houghton in his tribute “The Playwright: Living in the Present Tense”. Miller has written in every decade of this century since 1940s. They add up to an alternative history of a troubled century. It is a history told through the lives of those who have endeavoured to make sense of them as much as of the period in which they have lived. “Indeed his concern for those individual lives, and his belief that they hold a clue to the nature of public experience, is in itself an indication of his own moral commitment and dramatic strategy” (xxiv) avers Bigsby in his “Introduction” to Portable.

Miller is often praised, and occasionally decried by critics and readers who find Miller’s art inadequate in many ways. Some critics feel that there is at the heart of the playwright’s work something which seems to perplex and divide the readers and the audience of Miller’s works. “Some dismiss him as little more than a disciple of Ibsen; others cite him as a penetrating critic of American society and an important innovator in theatre. Some critics call his works ‘bloodless’, while others admire the subtlety of his characterization. There is disagreement; too, about whether Miller’s dramatic vision is profound or superficial, clear-eyed or sentimental”, points out Neil Carson (Carson, 1). Compared to Beckett or Sartre, some feel Miller seems naively hopeful; beside the formal experiments of Ionesco, Miller’s carefully crafted plays look a little outdated; there is a certain preachy quality in some plays that tends to make the audience uncomfortable.
Many critics say that Miller's characters are not fully drawn. To this Stephen Barker affirms, "As for Aristotle, for Miller the building of the character is far less important than the construction of challenges placed in the way of the individual caught in the collective swirl" (Bigsby, Companion, 235). If his plays are ineluctably social, as some critics complain, it is because he cannot conceive of the individual outside of a social context or of a society that does not reflect the values of those that constitute it. Miller tells Olga Carlisle and Rose Styron in an interview in 1966, "You live in the world even though you only vote once in a while" (Roudane, 100-101).

Another reason for Miller's unpopularity among a group of critics is the extremely autobiographical nature of his plays. "Whereas writers like Dickens or Shakespeare appear, like photographic plates, to be able to reproduce the astonishing variety of nature, Miller is more like a painter who works always from the same model. He does not so much create other people in his plays as divide himself up into a number of personae" (Carson, 3). On one hand, there are critics who feel that the autobiographical elements in the plays give them a heightened intensity and psychological reality; while others sense that because of too much of personal preoccupations of the playwright, he is, to a great extent, unable to enter sympathetically into the lives and problems of the characters which are very different from his own. Miller once confessed to Bigsby in his 1995 'Interview', "The plays are my autobiography. I can't write plays that don't sum up where I am. I'm in all of them. I don't know how else to go about writing" (Bigsby, Companion, 1).

In an Interview with Miller in 1960, Henry Brandon told him that Sartre and Miller were the two most powerful dramatists of the time. When asked to point out the difference between the two of them Miller said, "There is a great difference between
us. For one, I'm writing in a culture that does not truck with ideas; it resists knowing what it is doing. This goes for an ordinary individual and a gigantic corporation” (Roudane, 64). Compared to other twentieth century playwrights, Miller's purpose was not to experiment with the newer forms that Beckett and Ionesco were attempting in the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. Nevertheless, Miller did make a new innovation in form in his *Death of a Salesman* and *A Memory of Two Mondays*.

“'It is not the job of the theatre to reproduce life; it is to interpret life’, says Miller in an Interview with V Rajakrishna (Roudane, 337). Despite all the weaknesses that are pointed out Miller seems to be appreciated even today for he did interpret to the world the American way of life, in almost all his plays. In Europe the playwright has been extremely popular – last few years have seen highly successful productions of *Death of a Salesman, All My Sons* and *The American Clock* in London as well as in Germany and Italy. Whereas in United States the public appetite for Miller’s plays seem less keen than it once was. It reflects the difficulty of the serious American playwright to find a sympathetic audience in the current theatrical climate. As production costs have increased, it is difficult for anything but light entertainment to survive there. It is unfortunate for Miller that he is a serious populist dramatist at a time when entertainment and seriousness have come to seem ‘incompatible’. When Miller went to China to direct *Death of a Salesman* in 1983, the American critical community, thinking that the play could never be successfully staged in a Communist country, predicted a fiasco; Miller’s view that only one humanity exists made him sure that it would reach the Chinese, and of course he was spectacularly correct.
Prior to an analytical study of a few of Miller’s plays from the Existential point of view, there is a need, at this juncture, to take a quick look at what Existentialism, in common parlance, means; and Existentialist themes in literature in general.

Following are a few standard definitions of Existentialism:

- Wikipedia defines Existential philosophy as the “explicit conceptual manifestation of an existential attitude that begins with a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world” (Existentialism).
- “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its ‘subjectivity’” (Sartre), says Sartre, an Existential philosopher.
- According to Existential philosophers, “To exist is to be in encounter with a real world” (Macquarrie, 30).

The term ‘Existentialism’ was explicitly adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre, and through the wide dissemination of the postwar literary and philosophical output of Sartre and his associates—notably Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus—existentialism became identified with a cultural movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. Among the major philosophers identified as existentialists were Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber in Germany, Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel in France, the Spaniards José Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, and the Russians Nicholai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov. The nineteenth century philosophers, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich
Nietzsche, came to be seen as precursors of the movement. Existentialism was as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one.

In 1670, Blaise Pascal’s unfinished notes, published under the title of *Pensées* (Thoughts) described many fundamental themes common to what would be known as existentialism two or three centuries later. Pascal argued that without a god, life would be meaningless and miserable. People would only be able to create obstacles and overcome them in an attempt to escape boredom. These token-victories would ultimately become meaningless, since people would eventually die. In the 19th century, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) wrote one of his first existentially sensitive passages in a letter to his friend. In it, he describes a truth that is applicable for him:

> What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain knowledge must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do: the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die... - Søren Kierkegaard, Letter to Peter Wilhelm Lund dated August 31, 1835 (*Existentialism*).

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, like Pascal, were interested in people’s quiet struggle with the apparent meaninglessness of life and the use of diversion to escape boredom of life. Kierkegaard laid the foundation for modern religious existentialism and some of the fundamental principles of his philosophy can be listed as follows:

- The importance of the individual as against the mass
- The call to the authentic life
• Insistence upon freedom of choice
• Anxiety in the awareness of the uncertainties attending man’s choices
• The radical discontinuity of human experience
• Despair in the consciousness of alienation from God
• The inability of man ever to understand the world
• The need for complete and unquestioning faith in God (Horton and Edwards, 475-76).

With the exception of some important elements that were later added by Nietzsche (1844-1900) – chiefly the concept of Nihilism, the nothingness underlying life; and the idea of the Superman – a combination of the above features underlies all existentialist thought in the modern times.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) elaborates on his views on Existentialism and opines that human existence has the character of **thrownness**, that is man is ‘thrown’ into a situation which he does not control. The possibilities open to him at any time are conditioned by such factors as his race, his historical situation, his environment, his natural endowments, etc. He does not know where he came from nor whither is he going. This gives rise to **anxiety (German – Angst)**, a mood in which man is acutely conscious of a discord both in the world and in himself; an **anxiety** from which he wants to escape. In its acute form this mood of anxiety may result in a feeling of the complete meaninglessness of everything – the mood particularly vivid in *Waiting for Godot*. Heidegger suggests two ways to escape from this anxiety. The first, **inauthentic** existence is to lose “oneself by absorption in the world, in work, in things, or worse still to become absorbed in the impersonal anonymous existence of...
the mass which is a shedding of all responsibility for anything including oneself” (Happold, 76) which offers no ultimate escape; the other, authentic existence “in which one takes into oneself the whole situation as it exists in the world and in oneself, with all its finitude, discords and sin. It is an attitude of acceptance of every possibility of existence, including death” (Happold, 76).

The first literary writer who dealt with existentialist themes in his works was the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). His Notes from Underground details the story of a man who is unable to fit into society and unhappy with the identities he creates for himself. Many of Dostoevsky’s novels, such as Crime and Punishment covered issues pertinent to existential philosophy while offering story lines divergent from secular existentialism: for example in Crime and Punishment one sees the protagonist, Raskolnikov, experience existential crises and move toward a worldview similar to Christian Existentialism, which Dostoevsky had come to advocate.

Sartre (1905-1980), a philosopher and a literary artist, believed “existence precedes essence”. His theory introduces the most distinctive principle of existentialism, namely, the idea that no general, non-formal account of what it means to be human can be given, since that meaning is decided in and through existing itself. Existence is “self-making-in-a-situation”. In contrast to other entities, whose essential properties are fixed by the kind of entities they are, what is essential to a human being is not fixed by his type but by what he makes of himself, who he becomes. The fundamental contribution of existential thought lies in the idea that one’s identity is constituted neither by nature nor by culture, since to “exist” is precisely to constitute such an identity. “The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon
his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men” (Sartre), asserts Sartre in his lecture, *Existentialism is Humanism*, delivered in 1946. Sartre’s works *Nausea* and *No Exit* are written based on his existentialist ideologies.

Czech author Franz Kafka, another Existentialist writer often created surreal and alienated characters who struggle with hopelessness and absurdity, notably in his most famous novella, *The Metamorphosis*, or in his master novel, *The Trial*. In his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the French existentialist Albert Camus describes *Kafka’s œuvre* as “absurd in principle”, although he also finds the same “tremendous cry of hope” as is to be found in religious existentialists such as Kierkegaard which Camus himself rejects.

The notion of the Absurd contains the idea that there is no meaning to be found in the world beyond what meaning we give to it. This meaninglessness also encompasses the amorality or “unfairness” of the world. This contrasts with “karmic” ways of thinking in which “bad things don’t happen to good people” to the world where there is no such thing as a good person or a bad thing; what happens happens, and it may just as well happen to a good person as to a bad person. This contrasts our daily experience where most things appear to us as meaningful, and where good people do indeed, on occasion, receive some sort of “reward” for their goodness. Most existentialist thinkers, however, maintain that this is not a necessary feature of the world, and that it definitely is not a property of the world in-itself. Because of the world’s absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with the Absurd. The notion
of the absurd has been prominent in literature throughout history. Søren Kierkegaard, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky and many of the literary works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus contain descriptions of people who encounter the absurdity of the world. Albert Camus studied the issue of “the absurd” in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Angst, like the absurd, is another term very often used by Existentialist philosophers and needs to be defined here. Angst, sometimes called dread, anxiety or even anguish is a term that is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is generally held to be the experience of our freedom and responsibility. The archetypal example is that of the experience one has when standing on a cliff where one not only fears falling off it, but also dreads the possibility of throwing oneself off. In this experience that “nothing is holding me back”, one senses the lack of anything that predetermines either to throw oneself off or to stand still, and one experiences one’s own freedom. This sense of freedom gives rise to the feeling of anxiety or angst.

It can also be seen …how angst is before nothing, and this is what sets it apart from fear which has an object. While in the case of fear, one can take definitive measures to remove the object of fear, in the case of angst, no such “constructive” measures are possible. The use of the word “nothing” in this context relates both to the inherent insecurity about the consequences of one’s actions, and to the fact that, in experiencing one’s freedom as angst, one also realizes that one will be fully responsible for these consequences; there is no thing in you that acts in your stead, and that you can “blame” if something goes wrong (*Existentialism*, emphasis added).
As mentioned earlier many of the Existentialist philosophers were literary writers themselves. Similar existential motif can be identified in the works of other writers.

Existentialist literature tends to emphasize certain recurring themes: man alienated from an absurd world; the individual estranged from society; the individual’s isolation and subjectivity; his consequent feelings of anxiety, anguish, despair, nausea; the individual facing his own nothingness or confronting his own guilt; his struggle to distinguish between inauthentic and authentic selves; his assertion of personal freedom through irrevocable choice, particularly in extreme situations, limit situations and crisis situations; death consciousness and the need to define oneself against it; the victim-hero who creates his own values from within (Chatterji, 81).

In its literary manifestations, existentialism is varied and many sided. It is a kind of literature that has the ability to convey the sense of a crisis in civilization. We find aspects of existentialism in writers as different as Shakespeare, and Marquis de Sade, Tolstoy and Proust, Kafka and Pirandello; writers who have lived and written in the last five hundred years or more, though as a philosophical movement it is being recognized only towards the end of nineteenth century. “With its emphasis upon the alienation of man from an absurd world ... his recognition of the world as meaningless or negative, his consequent burden of soul-scarring anxieties, ... his obsessive desire to confront his imminent death on one side and his consuming passion to live on the other”--with these emphases, it is but natural that existentialism should have developed in a time of swift change when “the sensitive individual finds
himself fragmented and virtually destroyed by the exigencies of modern life” (Karl & Hamalian, 9).

Critics have pointed out existentialist aspects in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Pirandello’s *Cinci*, Sade’s *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*, Tolstoy’s *Memoirs of a Lunatic*, Brecht’s *Socrates Wounded*, Hemingway’s *The Old Man and The Sea*, Beckett’s *The Expelled* and even in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Most of these works and others written by existentialist philosophers themselves like Kafka’s *The Bucket Rider*, Sartre’s *The Room*, and Camus’s *The Stranger* reinforce the despairing fact that the individual “stubbornly seeks human identification in an inhuman world” (Karl & Hamalian, 9). The existentialists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem to be aware of a crisis, a threat, a fragmentation and alienation that are new in their chilling intensity. Modern man’s state is, as Eliot says, like bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind. The same spirit of existentialism is also expressed in art; Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893), is a symbol of this anxiety and despair of modern man.

Lionel Trilling brings out a wonderful comparison between the world of Shakespeare and Kafka in his work *The Opposing Self* considering both only as expositors of man’s suffering and cosmic alienation. He says,

It is Kafka who makes the more intense exposition....Shakespeare’s world quite as much as Kafka’s, is that prison cell which Pascal says the world is, from which daily the inmates are led to die; Shakespeare no less than Kafka forces upon us the cruel irrationality of the conditions of human life, the tale told by an idiot, the puerile gods who
torture us not for punishment but for sport; and no less than Kafka
Shakespeare is revolted by the fetor of the Prison of this world,
nothing is more characteristic of him than his imagery of disgust. But
in Shakespeare’s cell, the company is so much better than in Kafka’s,
the captains and kings and lovers and clowns of Shakespeare are alive
and complete before they die. In Kafka, long before the sentence is
executed, even long before the malign legal process is instituted,
something terrible has been done to the accused (Macquarrie, 263).

Miller records a similar observation in his *On Social Plays* about the works of the
American playwrights of the same period.

Consider our own Drama of the past forty years in comparison with
that of classical Greece, one elemental difference – which seems to me
to be our crippling hobble – will emerge. **The single theme to which
our most ambitious plays can be reduced is frustration.** In all of
them, from O’Neil’s through the best of Anderson, ... the underlying
log jam, so to speak, the unresolved paradox, is that, try as he will, the
individual is doomed to frustration when once he gains consciousness
of his identity. The image is that of the individual scratching away at a
wall beyond which stands society, his fellow men. Sometimes he
pounds at the wall, sometimes he tries to scale it or even blow it up,
but at the end the wall is always there, and the man himself is dead or
doomed to defeat in his attempt to live a human life” (*Theatre Essays,*
55, emphasis added).
Miller's own drama is no exception to the above mentioned description and that is what, in my opinion, makes Miller's plays existentialist in spirit. In 2002, Miller himself said in a public discussion in Paris, "Our writing has grown more and more existential and less and less ideological" (Miller on America).

An effort has been made in the consecutive chapters of this study to analyze a few plays of Miller from the existentialist point of view. The plays discussed are All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, A View from the Bridge, A Memory of Two Mondays, The American Clock, The Last Yankee and The Broken Glass. I have attempted to deal with the lesser read plays of Miller with an exception of Death of a Salesman and All My Sons. No study of Miller would be complete without a reading of Death of a Salesman. For Miller means Salesman and the two names are almost inseparable. Moreover both these plays, written six decades ago, are extremely relevant even today. Though most often researched upon, I have included them in the study with an intention of looking at them from a different angle; and not just to add a few more pages to the existing bulk of critical material on them. I have not included other major plays like The Crucible, After the Fall, Incident at Vichy, and The Price, as most of them have been taken up for study too often. Derek Parker has made an excellent study on After the Fall in his "Camusian Existentialism in Miller's After the Fall" and I believe, to say anything on that play from the Existentialist point of view would be redundant. The later plays interested me for they depict issues which are, to a great extent, the problems of the world in the present time.
"I was turning thirty then, the author perhaps of a dozen plays, none of which I could truly believe was finished", recollects Miller in his "Introduction" to the Collected Plays, "The decision formed to write one more, and if it turned out to be unrealizable, I would go into another line of work" (16). The play that resulted was All My Sons, which won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play in 1947. The critical and commercial success of this play marks a major turning point in the playwright’s career, as it was conferred on young Miller at a time when he was struggling to establish himself as a literary artist.

The play was based on a true wartime incident told to him by a friend. The story concerned a family from Middle West which had been destroyed when the daughter had reported her father to the authorities for selling faulty machinery to the Army. Miller says that he visualized the second-act climax of the play almost before the narrator finished his story, though the actual writing of the play took two years. The play explores the way in which choices in the past impinge upon, and shape unforeseen and inescapable consequences in the future. Keller is free to make his choice but with that freedom a burden of responsibility too is placed on him. In the play Miller shows "how the impulse to betray and to deny responsibility for others ... can run rampant and wreak havoc on the individual, his family, and his society – even, perhaps, civilization as a whole", remarks Steven R. Centola (Bigsby, Companion, 58).

Death of a Salesman stands apart from almost all of Miller’s other works. Nothing in The Man Who Had All Luck or All My Sons prepared New York audience for the extraordinary achievement of the play. Ever since it premiered on Broadway on 10...

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February 1949, *Death of a Salesman* has been an indispensable script in the modern theater. Running for 742 Broadway performances, Salesman entered the canon of American theater with glory. Miller’s accomplishments in Salesman were revolutionary for 1949, fundamental for 1999, the play’s golden anniversary. Subtitled “Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem” the play has a narrative which unwinds through Willy Loman’s daydreams and private conversations. Miller’s use of time—not flashbacks or interruptions—was highly experimental. According to Miller himself, “The play is really one continuous poem” (Roudane, 276). Equally innovative and controversial, in 1949, was Miller’s idea that *Salesman* was a tragedy of the common man.

In February 1950, as the original production approached its first anniversary, a newspaper reporter marveled that *Salesman* had already become an American legend in many parts of the world, commenting that the reason why this play has achieved such a stature in these distant lands defies analysis. Willy Loman entered the world’s consciousness as the very image of the American traveling salesman, an identity with which the business world was far from comfortable. Miller says in an interview with Murry Schumach, “I think it’s true, that wherever there is theatre in the world, it (*Salesman*) has been played” (Roudane, 261).

Miller’s *Salesman* was not just the tragedy of the traveling salesman of the post-depression era, struggling to fulfill the American Dream in his and his son’s lives; not merely the story of a man stubbornly seeking human recognition in an inhuman world, at the time when Miller wrote it. In this age of downsizing on all levels, from laborers to vice presidents, Miller is even more contemporaneous. The despair, the
feeling of worthlessness that the playwright has caught in the play is universal. Robert Anderson, a playwright in the “Forum” of playwrights that met to discuss *Salesman* in 1998 says, “Probably fifty years from now, men will be seeing *Salesman*, and, remembering their father or experiencing the shock of recognition of their own lives, will be sitting in some theater, bent over weeping or standing and applauding. For Miller, in portraying the life and death of Willy Loman, has obeyed his own admonition...attention has to be paid” (Colin, 591).

The plays *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* deal with a crisis of identity in the family as well as in the society. Both the plays depict the American life in the postwar period and depict one of Miller’s favourite themes, the father-son conflict. These two plays have been analysed in one chapter entitled “The Angst in the Family”.

In the next chapter of my thesis, “The Angst in the Community”, I have made a study of Miller’s Double Bill of the fifties, *A Memory of Two Mondays* and *A View from the Bridge* together; as, according to Miller, both the plays “are reassertions of the existence of the community” (*Theatre Essays*, 260). In 1953, a phone call from a friend and actor, Martin Ritt, prompted Miller to begin a one-act play for a small theatre group in New York. Excited by the prospect of writing for a troupe of young actors and not for the commercial theatre, the playwright completed the play, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, in less than two weeks. The group liked the play but they needed another play as a curtain raiser to round up the evening show. Enthusiastic Miller wrote another one-act play *A View from the Bridge*, an Italian tragedy in ten days. The second play, intended only as a curtain raiser, turned out to be a much more complex one. As the young troupe finally could not perform the two plays, later in 1955, the double bill was performed in Broadway.
A Memory of Two Mondays remains the least known of Miller’s mature plays, though he has himself said there is nothing in his collected plays that he loves better. The dramatist found the seeds of the play in the auto parts warehouse that he worked in, during the depression to earn his college money. Miller says in Timebends,

I suppose I chose the material out of a need to touch again a reality I could understand, unlike the booming, inane America of the present. In a trivial time that delighted in prosperous escapism, I had managed to seize on the one subject nobody would want to confront, the Depression and the struggle to survive (353).

A little more than a dozen characters are brought together in a warehouse where most of them have spent their working lives. Bert, an eighteen-year-old is there temporarily: the two Mondays of the title are separated by the time it takes him to earn enough money for his college. It is through his memory that we are shown the warehouse, its occupants and the life there. The warehouse is symbolic of a monotonous absurd existence that helps them only to pass time between days, weeks, and months. Although in reality months have elapsed between the opening and closing of the play, time is compressed in Bert’s memory and the play continues in one flow without the division of scenes: yet another innovation of Miller with the form. The play delves deep into the idea of sympathy for others and a sense of sharing a common fate even as one escapes from it.
A View from the Bridge began as a one-act play which was expanded into the two act version for its London production. In the earlier version Miller had made extensive use of the verse form, especially in the speeches of the narrator; but later he chose to alter into the prose form so that even the narrator could be identified as one with the Italian-immigrant community that he projects in the play. The play is based on a story about the community that he had heard from a longshoreman about a man, who informed the Immigration Bureau of two brothers who were living illegally in his house, in order to break the engagement of one of them with his niece. Miller brings out the angst of a man estranged from the society because of his own actions.

Miller wrote The American Clock, a mural of the American society during the Depression in 1976. The play was inspired by Studs Terkel's Hard Times, a collection of interviews with veterans of the Depression. The play records the devastating effects of the national calamity on different segments of the American society including the Baum family, reminiscent of Miller's own family, way back in 1929. A rather unconventional series of scenes and moods, the play failed to appeal to the entertainment-seeking audience in America. Miller continued to revise the play till 1984 when it was performed at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Later, the Peter Brook version of the play, “A Vaudeville”, performed at Britain's National Theatre, was immensely successful.

Miller intended to remind the boom-time America of the gory stories of the past that the country and the world went through in 1930s. Like Steinbeck in Grapes of Wrath, Miller projects the plethora of human suffering only to caution humanity of the uncertainties of life, “The American clock is ticking away, the wind is rising, and we
may be in for another big blow” (Roudane, 310) as Studs Terkel puts it. The Depression was the background for many of Miller’s plays, but in no other play Miller, so explicitly, paints the actual picture as vividly as he does in The American Clock. That is basically the reason why I have dealt with this play in a separate chapter named, “The Angst That Wealth Begets”.

Miller was seventy-five years old, in 1990, a good time to settle into a cozy retirement. But for Miller it wasn’t so; 1990s have proved to be his most prolific period since the 1960s. The two plays The Last Yankee and The Broken Glass, produced in this decade, are examined in the fourth chapter, “The Angst in Relationships”. Both the plays deal with the problem of marital discord, a rising menace of the twenty first century.

In The Last Yankee, Miller presents a pair of married couples, each placed under stress by the differing needs and perceptions of those who once thought they shared so much. Miller had time and again attacked the American myth of success, complete happiness and easy life. Like in real life, the characters in the play, true to the myth, become so obsessed by material gains that they forget the real meaning of life and live in a world of anxiety and fear, “in fear of falling, fear of losing status” (Bigsby, Companion, 174). This constant fear estranges relationships, throws people off mental balance; and two out four main characters in the play land up in the state mental hospital. Miller gives us an insight into what really sustains life, not material possessions, but acceptance. Only if we can come to terms with the world as it is can we be free from mental aberrations.
The Broken Glass is set in Brooklyn in 1938, a few days after Kristallnacht. America, still in the grip of the Depression and in a state of deep spiritual disorganization, hardly seems to absorb the horrifying news; while Sylvia Gellburg, a Jewish woman in Brooklyn does. A few days later she is diagnosed to be suffering from hysterical paralysis. The real cause for the ailment is unclear and Miller unfolds the truth as the play proceeds; the root cause of her problem is a discordant marital relationship. The paralysis of Sylvia is symbolic of the paralysis of the rest of the world in the face of the terrible crises in Germany. The play, Miller suggests is about denial of responsibilities at the personal as well as national level.

An analysis of the above mentioned plays brings to light that there is an underlying common factor that runs through all of them, namely a sense of a crisis in the individual as well as collective level; a sense of crisis, if I might say, in civilization. I would choose to call this sense of crisis as Existentialism, and Miller’s themes very much Existentialist in spirit.

The excerpts from the first four plays that is All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, A View from the Bridge, and A Memory of Two Mondays, and the “Introduction” to Collected Plays in the consecutive chapters of the thesis are taken from Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays (With an “Introduction”), published by Allied Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1973. The passages from the rest of the plays; The American Clock, The Last Yankee and The Broken Glass; an “Introduction” by Harold Clurman; and an “Introduction” by Christopher Bigsby are extracts from The Portable Arthur Miller edited by Bigsby, published by Penguin books, New York, 1995. Beside each of the excerpts only the page number of the consecutive books is 31.
mentioned in parenthesis. The other works of Miller that has been a constant source of information and ideas are his Autobiography, *Timebends: A Life* (henceforth referred as *Timebends*), and *The Theatre Essays Of Arthur Miller* (henceforth referred as *Theatre Essays*). Wherever these books are quoted, the names of the books and page numbers are mentioned in parenthesis beside the quotes.

In all his works Miller intended to project "the true condition of man," which is life lived in "comradely embrace, people helping one another rather than looking for ways to trip each other up" (*Timebends*, 111). The commercial theatre of America, catering to lighter entertainments, enslaved by its profit making needs, was unresponsive to a great extent to Miller’s serious plays backed by serious ideas. Miller often resented the fact that many a time when his plays were being performed in half a dozen countries abroad there were none in New York. Despite the treatment that the theatre audience of America gave him, he remained socially engaged and continued to write till the end with conscience, clarity, and compassion. As Chris Keller says to his mother in *All My Sons*, "Once and for all you must know that there’s a universe of people outside, and you’re responsible to it" (126); Miller’s work is infused with his sense of responsibility to humanity and to his audience.