CHAPTER V

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The Price may seem to mark a return to the world of Joe Keller and Willy Loman. It may be considered as a presentation of the quintessential American family witnessing the struggles of a man with "the wrong dreams". A close examination of the play would show that while Miller continues to expose the vacuity of the American dream, he is more concerned with the nature of human freedom. In this respect The Price goes more to After the Fall and Incident at Vichy than to All My Sons and Death of a Salesman. The play is a less organized presentation than After the Fall, less ambitious morally than Incident at Vichy, but theatrically a more assured masterpiece, as Dennis Welland has shown. ¹ The universality ascribed to Willy Loman as a modern everyman may not be seen in The Price. If, in All My Sons, the Kellers have been haunted by family tensions which arise from public issues, in The Price,

a family play which is essentially private, the clash is between family loyalty and self-advancement. The play deals with issues such as the success ethic ("were we really brought up to believe in one another? we were brought up to succeed, weren’t we?"); the rivalry between siblings, the impact of the Depression on families, and finally the price of integrity.

The play, The Price, is set in the attic of a Manhattan brownstone house. It relates the story of two brothers who meet again for the first time in sixteen years to dispose of an attic full of discarded furniture. They meet to face the past. The sight of the former home and various reminders of his youth provide Victor with an appropriate background for the revelations of the past which follow. Victor is in a kind of stasis. He is haunted by a suspicion that his marriage with Esther has no meaning and that there must be someone to blame for his being a police sergeant instead of being a successful scientist. His career has been sacrificed because of his father who was broken by the crash and the Depression. Victor sums up the meaning of the Depression in the words "One day you're the head of the house, at the head of the table,

Subsequent citations from The Price are from this edition. Page numbers are given in parenthesis against the quotations.
and suddenly you're shit. Overnight" (p.107). Victor's wife is embittered by his failure. Rather than face the reality of the position, he resorts to alcohol. Into this tense situation there intrudes the figure of the furniture dealer, eighty-nine-year-old Solomon. He is a choric figure who acts as an arbitrator between Walter's callous realism and Victor's apparent good nature. The furniture dealer is practically dragged out of retirement. That he should be working again enables him to regain a sense of purpose in his life. Thus when he resists Walter's attempts to take the business away from him, he is fighting for his own survival. In Walter we find a successful surgeon who has succumbed to greed and thus sacrificed the sanctity of his vocation. He has avoided his brother for many years and the importance of their present meeting lies in the fact that bitterness which has existed between them for long comes to the surface. The processes of accusation and confession which follow gradually reveal the truth about an embroidered past which the brothers had woven to suit their own purposes. The conflict between the two brothers in The Price, like the conflict between father and son in All My Sons, is basically a conflict between two social attitudes. Walter, the surgeon, has cultivated
rich patience and done empire-building with nursing homes. As Walter tells Victor, "The difference is that you haven't hurt other people to defend yourself. ... you simply tried to make yourself useful" (p.84). The nodal point in the relationship between the brothers is to be found in the sequence in which Walter, broken down partly by guilt, tries to help his brother secure an advantageous foothold in society. But Victor refuses the offer because it involves cheating of a kind he has consistently, if not heroically, avoided. At the end of the play each brother is finally left "touching the structure of his life." The relationships between the main characters in this play are so constantly and dramatically shifting that the discussions are liable to interruptions that either postpone their resolutions or push them onto a different level. In other words, the conversation is geared not so much to the pursuit of ideas as to the exploration of the characters and the kind of lives they have lived. As Ronald Hayman has seen, there is in The Price less physical action than in Incident at Vichy and more exploration of

3 Arthur Miller, 'Author's Production Note,' The Price (New York, 1968), p. 117.

character. Victor the policeman, and Esther, his wife, arrive at a new understanding with each other. Inspite of its being the only confrontation Victor has had with his brother for years, there is a substantial development in relationship with his brother who once refused him the five hundred dollar loan he needed to make a start at a University.

Though Victor tries hard to avoid making any kind of personal contact with Solomon, the eighty-nine year old antique dealer who arrives to offer him a price for the furniture in his father's flat, the old man establishes a relationship in which they both open up to each other. Against the background of stacked furniture, the opening conversation between Victor and Esther evokes their present and their past together. Victor's straightforwardness and his stubborn idealism are revealed in the course of this conversation with the opportunist Esther. The characters in The Price have committed themselves to courses of action which have their roots in the past. In The Price the present grows out of the past, but the past is not introduced in the way it was introduced in All My Sons. There is a closer intertwining of the past and the present in this play. Had Victor not preferred to take on the
burden of supporting his father, he would not still be a humble policeman. He too could have carved out a scientific career for himself like his brother. When Walter arrives, Victor has the chance of making twelve thousand dollars for himself out of selling the furniture and by pursuing a tax-evading scheme. We see Victor making the same kind of decision which he has always made. Moral scruple, cautiousness and generosity, and deep seated urge to preserve the status quo govern and motivate Victor's actions. He winds up with eleven hundred and fifty dollars for the furniture and remaining in the police force. The action of the play, with its focus on the furniture, shows characters at the crossroads of decision. The present texture of the life that the characters lead is subtly built into the play's design. Esther's drinking, Victor's nocturnal teeth-grinding, and Walter's camel-hair coat, gifted by a patient, are all effortlessly fitted into the dialogue. The reference to the nursing homes that Walter owned until he sold them after his breakdown is significant.

There's big money in the aged, you know.
Helpless, desperate children trying to dump their parents - nothing like it. (pp.81-82).
Miller here makes multiple use of detail which helps him to characterize Walter, to show the contrast between Victor and his father, and to provide a background.

In *Incident at Vichy*, Lebeau explains that he is still in the country because his mother could not bear to sail to America leaving the furniture behind. In *The Price*, furniture is physically present on the stage. It is used as a base for dialogue. It is a source for visual augmentation of the dialogue. The sequence in which Victor tries to make Solomon name his price for the furniture is sustained comedy with the introduction of contrived twists. The more Solomon, one of Miller's best comic creations, promises to come to the point, the more he beats about the bush. The more Victor rebuffs his friendliness, the more the oldman bounces back:

Solomon: (glancing off, he turns back to Victor with a deeply concerned look) Tell me, what's with crime now? It's up, hey?

Victor: Yeah, it's up, it's up. Look, Mr. Solomon, let me make one thing clear, heh? I'm not sociable.

Solomon: You're not

Victor: No, I'm not; I'm not a businessman, I'm
not good at conversations. So let's get to a price, and finish. Okay?

Solomon: You don't want we should be buddies

Victor: That's exactly it.

Solomon: So we wouldn't be buddies! (He sighs.) But just so you'll know me a little better - I'm going to show you something. (He takes out a leather folder which he flips open and hands to Victor) There's my discharge from the British Navy. You see? "His majesty's Service." (p.35)

The conversation between Victor and Solomon is used to put a perspective on the furniture which is both funny and central to the play's subject. When Walter comes in, the furniture makes him reminisce and Solomon keeps interrupting, offering to exclude this or that piece from the price agreed to when Esther comes back, the discussion about the price brings to the fore the conflicting loyalties and attitudes of Esther and Victor. Esther's concern is with money. Walter's concern is to expiate the guilt he feels about Victor's failure. While Esther is in favour of tax-evading schemes, Victor is realistic enough to see that his brother is trying to buy him. He refuses to be bought because he has already paid for the quality that
is there in him which Walter envies. Walter seems to approve of Victor's attitude more than Esther does. Her ineffective attempts to make Victor accept what Walter is offering reveal an irony. Walter's confessional speeches appear delicately in relation to the whole pattern of the past. One of the key points in the plot of The Price is that the selfish old father who died sixteen years previously is only in a sense the villain of the piece. Victor's whole life would have been different if only the old man had either offered to pay for his education out of the amount he had hoarded, or at least passed on the telephone message that Walter was willing to pay for it. But still, Miller does not put the responsibility for the mistake on the dead man's shoulders. The climax of the play reveals that the five hundred dollars were not the crux of the matter. Victor knew all along that his father had enough money but he had compulsion about it. The conversation below between Esther and Victor is revelatory:

Esther: Paree! To stick us into a furnished room so you could send him part of your pay? Even after we were married, to go on sending
him money? Put off having children, live like mice — and all the time you knew he ...? Victor, I'm trying to understand you. Victor? — Victor! Victor: (roaring out, agonised). Stop it! Silence. (Then) Jesus, you can't leave everything out like this. The man was a beaten dog, ashamed to walk in the street, how do you demand his last buck — ? (p.105)

Victor in effect says that he could not bear to be a separate person towards his father because his mother acted like a separate person.

He couldn't believe in anybody any more, and it was unbearable to me! (The unlooked — for return of his old feelings seems to anger him. Of Walter) He'd kicked him in the face; my mother — (he glances toward Walter as he speaks; there is hardly a pause) the night he told us he was bankrupt, my mother ... It was right on this couch. She was all dressed up — for some affair, I think. Her hair was piled up, and long earrings? And he had his tuxedo on ... and made us all sit down; and he told us it was all gone. And she vomited. (Slight Pause. His horror and pity twist in his voice.) All over his arms. His hands. Just kept on vomiting, like thirty-five years coming up. And he sat there. Stinking like a sewer. And a look came onto his face. I'd never seen a man look
like that. He was sitting there, letting it
dry on his hands. (Pause. He turns to Esther.)
What's the difference what you know? Do you
do everything you know?

(She avoids his eyes, his mourning shared)

Not that I excuse it; it was idiotic, nobody
has to tell me that. But you're brought up to
believe in one another, you're filled full of
that crap - you can't help trying to keep it
going, that's all. (p.108).

Victor is a victim through whose conflicts with his brother
and his wife are revealed, within the framework of the
family, the operations of the scruples of the world at large.
Though the family seems to be the frame, a social dilemma
which is inseparable from a political dilemma is unravelled
through this play. As Miller says in his production note,
"As the world now operates, the qualities of both brothers
are necessary to it; surely their respective psychologies
and moral values conflict at the heart of the social
dilemma." 4

4Arthur Miller, 'Arthur Miller's Production Note,'
In *The Price* we are presented with several characters who became suddenly aware of their freedom of action. This is a demonstration of Miller's earlier comment that "the only thing worth doing today in the theatre .... is to synthesise the subjective drives of the human being with what is now demonstrably the case, namely, that by an act of will man can and has changed the world."5

Victor, the unsuccessful policeman, becomes an image for what Miller sees as a nerveless and deluded society. In his essay 'Tragedy and the Common Man' he defines his understanding of tragedy. He insists that tragedy is a quality which exalted the "thrust for freedom" and which automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to attain his freedom. This is an ironical comment on Victor's failure to recognise his own freedom of action. Unlike Miller's conception of tragic hero, Victor remains passive in the face of "a challenge to his dignity."6


In recent drama man is shown to be unequivocably in control of his own destiny. Man's absurdity is seen to be of his own making in the hands of a dramatist like Edward Albee for whom the absurd is a more clear social concept than it is for Beckett and Ionesco. If, in the case of the later, the absurd emerges from man's desire for order in a chaotic universe, in the case of the former it derives not from the human condition but from the failure of social and personal values. This is a society in which, as Victor points out, "there's just no respect for anything but money" (p.48). For the American dramatist, as Bigsby rightly observes, absurdity is rooted in Victor's kind of perversion of the puritan ethic and in what Walter calls "the slow, daily fear you call ambition" (p.83). Miller has come to recognise, as evident from his essay "Morality and Modern Drama," that the great faith in social change as an amelioration or a transforming force of the human soul leaves something to be wanted. Miller believes in the possibility of change not in the form of social organisation.

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but in the very nature of human response. He is aware that the social solution of the evil in men has failed. He insists on the need to state a belief in life and for the existence of a viable system of values. Miller's basic commitment is to the need to organise life and not present the case for death and despair.⁹

The 'Production Note' to *The Price* pleads for a fine balance of sympathy to be maintained between the roles of Victor and Walter. While the first act of the play, with its two sustained duologues indicating an ebb and flow of mood, concentrates on Victor and exposition from his angle, the second act is primarily determined by Walter. Walter's disclosures are more startling and however much Victor might envy and mistrust Walter, affection and convention make him want to respect Walter. But both the past and Walter conspire to frustrate the desire. Walter's offer to Victor of a job in his research centre is seen in practical terms to be something for which Victor is not suitable. Victor's refusal to accept the job is not certainly due to "sacrificing his life to vengeance" of which Walter accuses him.

Walter is not to be regarded as Miller's spokesman. His statement, "we invent ourselves, Vic, to wipe out what we know" (p. 110) cannot be taken as the play's message. The Price constantly focuses on the question how we can be sure of what we know. Victor's devotion to his father may have been misplaced. His motives may have been more mixed than he recognised. Inventing ourselves to wipe out what we know and inventing in order that we may know how to protect what we are, both impose their price. Victor and Walter offer exemplifications on this theme of price. The need to "take one's life in one's arms," (p. 31) as Holga had put it in After the Fall, is underlined in the play by Solomon. The furniture, stored for sixteen years in a single room and left untouched, is in many ways an appropriate image for Victor himself. When Solomon says of the furniture that it has "no more possibilities," the comment could apply to Victor's own self-image. Solomon is the professional in love with his work. He is secure in the knowledge of his competence. He finds it incomprehensible that Victor offers a rationalization of his father's defeat. He says, "listen, I can tell you
bounces. I went busted 1932; then 1923 they also knocked me out; the panic of 1904, 1898 ... But to lay down like that ... (p.45)

His longevity, liveliness of mind and ready turn of wit are a sign of his endurance. In the play he represents a force for life and for continuity. While the Frenches remained locked in their past, only Solomon, at eighty-nine, can face the future with any confidence. Even he has some misgivings when he is left alone with his purchase. But the curtain falls as he puts on the Laughing Record, and like Victor at the opening of the play, succumbs to the infection of its laughter. When he puts on the Laughing Record, 'shakes his head back and forth as though to say "It still works:"' This presumably implies that his own adage about work still works.

The moment when Esther comes to Victor's side as wife and ally, nothing was sacrificed. The acceptance of the present is noticed in her willingness that he should wear his uniform. His decision to return for the mask and foil of his college fencing days is an instance of unaccep-
tance of the past which must be contrasted with Walter's throwing the dress back. The simple action of survival indicates that the play ends with the confirmation of an individual.

Victor's uniform, in this highly 'clothes-conscious play', is indicative of his desire to believe in a world based on order and justice. Walter's clothes symbolise his professional standing. He half-depreciatingly prices it at two gallstones. The phrase two gallstones associates him with Quentin's mother in After the Fall who was not allowed to marry an impecunious medical student. In the case of Walter, the real price of the overcoat has been a broken marriage. Esther wears a simple, inexpensive, suit with an unpretentious look. This is evidence of the greater stability of her marriage. The visit to the cinema for which Victor and Esther leave as the play ends is a modest attempt at shared experience. The play while depicting this facet of family life in terms of a symbol of price that the furniture is, Miller is offering in this play a subtle critique of the values and rationalisations of a materialistic society with a great deal of social realism.