CHAPTER VI

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Miller is one of the most socially conscious of dramatists concerned with both the psychological man and the social man and inevitably thereby dealing with the problem of identity. The basic premise of all his early work, as Gerald Weales observes, is that "society is an image-making machine, a purveyor of myths and prejudices which provide the false faces and false values that modern man wears."¹ For a playwright who believes in the dictum that a play ought to make sense to "commonsense people," a public view of the theatre, with its belief that psychology is an insufficient basis for it, is an appropriate one, for the proper concerns of the theatre are social. Miller himself has shown a preference for plays which seek causation not merely in psychology but in society at large. A significant aspect of these plays, "solidly carpented structures" as Ronald Hayman calls them,²

is that they reveal Miller's concern to analyse propositions in terms of process, to ask how something came to be the way it is. In All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible and The Price, the characters have committed themselves to courses of action having their roots in the past so much so that the action of the plays cannot move forward without moving backward. All My Sons, beginning almost immediately before the climax of its story, subtly interweaves exposition with current action. As in Oedipus Rex or Ghosts, the plot of the play unravels itself from the present action like a ghost from the past. In this Ibsenite play, Joe Keller's guilt and the demonstration of its social consequence are rendered not in terms of any abstract principles but in terms of personal relationships which compose the reality and enforce the truth. A social reality which includes social relationships and personal needs is depicted in the play through the theme of responsibility and consequence. To quote Raymond Williams:

The key to social realism, in these terms, lies in a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society, in
which neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous and in real terms inseparable process.\(^3\)

The best illustration of Miller’s ideas relating to social realism and technique is to be found in \textit{Death of a Salesman} where Willy Loman is seen as the emblem of an ethic — the American dream of success in its degenerated form. The family origins of Willy reveal that his dreams arise from his rootedness in an adventurous American past, a past impinging upon the contemporary tendency of rootlessness. Willy Loman is an archetypal figure, an American Everyman. The identification with Everyman makes it obvious that in \textit{Death of a Salesman}, as in the other Expressionist plays, the ultimate malady that is examined is not that of the individual but that of the society. But the kind of expressionism in \textit{Death of a Salesman} is something which strengthens realism rather than proceeding at the level purely of symbolic characters portraying

an inner effusion. It is in some important ways a departure from Strindberg's *The Dream Play*, O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*. It is a kind of social expressionism that is present in *Death of a Salesman*. It enables the false consciousness contained in the conditioning which Willy imposes upon his sons to be "broken into by real consciousness, in actual life and relationships." The concern with larger social issues is the key to Miller's definition of Expressionism. In 'The Family in Modern Drama' he defines Expressionism thus: "It is a form ... which manifestly seeks to dramatise the conflict of either social, religious, or moral forces per se."  

In this play Miller presents us with a realism concerned with why rather than what happens. A totally "articulated work" instead of an anecdote, the play makes a highly selective use of the expressionistic technique only to reveal more clearly the pattern of life itself. The very special theatrical style of Miller's work has much to tell us about the structure of realism in the light of what John

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Gassner has called its "multivalent and relativistic character." When we compare *Death of a Salesman* with plays such as *Emperor Jones*, *The Ha'iy Age*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* and so on, we find that Miller affirms realism in the very process of transcending it.

*The Crucible*, based on a historical event, is technically less interesting than its predecessors. The witch trials enact through their dramatization the moral crisis of a society. This enactment is a parable of the modern witchhunt in Miller's own society. His background of liberalism engendered by the Depression, his belief in social responsibility and his preoccupation with themes of guilt form an appropriate backdrop against which *The Crucible* is to be placed. The theme of *The Crucible* attracted Miller because it dealt with the central theme of the social life of the period:

Simply, it is the question of whether the democratic guarantees protecting political minorities ought to be set aside in time of crisis. More personally, it is the question of whether one's vision of the truth ought

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to be a source of guilt at a time when the mass of men condemn it as a dangerous and devilish lie. It is an enduring theme ... because there never was, nor will there ever be, an organized society able to countenance calmly the individual who insists that he is right while the vast majority is absolutely wrong.\(^7\)

In its concern with conscience, in its lengthy prefatory comment on the background, in its postscript tracing the subsequent history of the characters, in its interrupted dialogues (especially in the first scene) which are more in the nature of elaborations on the theme than stage directions, \textit{The Crucible} is the most Shavian of Miller's plays. In \textit{Incident at Vichy}, \textit{The Crucible}, and Miller's adaptation of Ibsen's \textit{An Enemy of the People}, the legal system is seen to be almost irrelevant to the protagonist's defence of his conception of dignity and justice. In its polarisation of good and evil, the issue of public morality perpetrating injustice seems almost allegorical. As Leonard Moss has noted, "an accusation-defense rhythm of a trial" is built into some of Miller's plays including \textit{All My Sons}.

Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A View from the Bridge, and After the Fall. Hidden guilt, brought to light in varying methods, emerges into the consciousness at a moment of climactic revelation demonstrating the Ibsenite method of causal movement from past action to present reaction. Joe Keller and Willy Loman conceal their crimes and their moral lapses. John Proctor indulges in a confession. Quentin arrives at the conclusion that all men are guilty. While in All My Sons and in The Crucible sin is suggested by the verbal allusions and by the protagonists' behaviour, in Death of a Salesman and After the Fall memory accentuates the discrepancy between inward reality and outward appearance and in the process shows the gap between private life and social life. The implications of this are suggested by apt metaphors. In All My Sons there is the fruitful tree destroyed in its prime. In Death of a Salesman "green leaves" are blotted out by the outlines of an asphalt jungle and the fluted melody is displaced by childish nonsense from a tape recorder. In After the Fall a ruined

tower is a memorial for horrors committed by ordinary men, and in *The Price* there is the massive, discarded furniture and all the psychological and moral connotations of price that are formulated before it. *After the Fall*, somewhat following the form of a confessional monologue, shows a way of looking at man and his nature as the only source of the violence which has nearly come to destroying the race. This shows how Miller's plays speak for the spirit of the time. In their guilt and in the symptoms of the malaise they reveal (Eddie Carbone, for example, in *A View from the Bridge*), some of Miller's characters may resemble those that Tennessee Williams, the most "internal" of contemporary American dramatists, has created. While incestrous inclinations, sexual jealousy arising from a psychotic condition, and so on are the thematic preoccupations of Tennessee Williams, for Miller the theatre is not for a retreat into areas of psycho-sexual romanticism but for an analytic inspection and recognition of the human condition by unifying psychological and social perspectives. But ironically Miller almost achieves coherent social drama where he explores his characters' inward nature.
The Price is in some ways a continuation of All My Sons and Death of a Salesman. The conflict between the two brothers in this play is basically like the conflict between father and son in All My Sons. It is a conflict between two social attitudes. Arthur Miller has focused in all the plays discussed above on the struggle of the individual in attaining his rightful place in society. The struggle involves passing through a crisis of identity and asserting the ego. As Miller states in the essay, 'The Family in Modern Drama,' a writer "cannot hope to achieve truly high excellence short of an investigation into the whole gamut of causation of which society is a manifest and crucial part." He must answer the essential question, "how may man make for himself a home in that vastness of strangers and how may he transform that vastness into a home?" Though Arthur Miller is less prolific as a writer than O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, in terms of thematic concerns and experimentation with expressionistic, realistic and rhetorical styles, he is less repetitive than either of them. In laying a siege to "the fortress of unrela-

tedness, "his drama views the family as a source through which the individual is related to the society. Miller is a dramatist who confronts aspects of the human situation ignored by a theatre obsessed with either psychology or sociology. As Edward Murray points out, in the fusion of the social and psychological lies the strength of Miller's work. Miller, according to him, has avoided "the extremes of clinical psychiatric case studies on the one hand and mere sociological reports on the other ... he has indicated... how the drama might maintain in delicate balance both personal and social motivation." Further, Miller approached the theatre not merely as a means of expression, but as a "means of knowing."