Arthur Miller's Contribution to
Modern American Drama

America is the richest and the most powerful country today, but its foundation is laid on a number of colonies. People from all over Europe went to America and settled their colonies which in due course of time grew into states and ultimately got united as a nation called the United States of America (USA). America had two parts: the Southern America and Northern America. The Southern part was more developed as it was inhabited by more well-to-do people. The people of the South were owners of plantations for which they needed a lot of labour. Thus labour was made available to them by the poor Negroes who had to lead a very hard life. They were called slaves and were treated like slaves, or worse than slaves. They had to satisfy the wishes of their masters who kept them like cattle. They had no choice of work or movement. They had to work at the instance of their owners. Not only this they could be bought and sold like cattle and were good as the property of the master. One can hardly imagine how miserable they were.

It will not be wrong to say that slavery was a black spot on the name of humanity. Most of the people of the Northern part of America realised their agony, and began to make efforts to
improve their life. They tried to persuade the people of the South to treat them as human beings. Luckily the President of America, Abraham Lincoln was a noble man imbued with humanitarian spirit. He felt very unhappy at the existence of this institution of slavery and decided once for all to put an end to it. He employed all means to persuade the Southern people that slavery was a blemish on their fair name of America. But he could not succeed in convincing the Southern people to abolish slavery. The people of the South probably felt that they could not do the work on their plantations without the slaves. Hence they insisted on the continuance of the institution of slavery come what may. It led to a conflict between the Northern people and the Southern people whom turned into war in which the Southerners were defeated, and the institution of slavery was ultimately abolished.

It was after the abolition of slavery that fine arts made their appearance in America. Today American literature has attained a distinguished place. While Eliot is regarded as one of the greatest poets, Eugene O’Neill is regarded as one of the greatest dramatic artists of modern America.

It was, however, not so in the nineteenth century. Until the beginning of the twentieth century ever American critics treated American literature as if it were merely a branch of English literature. Now it is recognised as a special achievement of Americans. Now it has found a place in the language of every
country. The colonists came from different parts of the world and settled in the new world, had in their minds the idea of earning money, or pursue the ways of life which were not allowed to them in their households.

In the words of Lawrence Stiffer, "The earliest colonial writing suffered from general absence of printing presses; there were no libraries and schools. Even the number of readers was very limited."

The most popular among the branches of literary art was poetry. But it did not cater to the aesthetic temper of the Americans. The poets appeared more interested in the moral than in the aesthetic values.

The end of the seventeenth century witnessed the decline of Puritan poetry. The Half way convent was a clear expression of toleration. It may be noted that during the seventeenth century Philosophy and psychology of Hobles and Lock had thought the way of living in the eighteenth century. The conclusion of war made the United States free from any danger and inspired a national optimism and confidence. At the time of Romanticism which suited the temperament of nineteenth century Americans emphasised individuality and emotion.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the scientific theories of mid-nineteenth century were interpreted by European
philosophers and writers as evidence that man's life was determined by biological and economic forces. Marx and other economists showed man to be victim of his own industrial civilization. The writers and thinkers examined their own society in this light.

These new current thoughts while still retaining much of their own traditional faith in the autonomy of the individual. In 1954 they decided to outlaw segregation. It found an expression of great resentment in the novels and essays of writers like Elison, one of the great influential voices of the Black Power movement. Many of the women writers and a few of men continued to follow the non-traditional images of black people.

Colonial Americans followed the classical drama and the highly developed drama of England. Some of those people had migrated from the other countries. Most of them migrated in the nineteenth century. During the first half of the nineteenth century some of the most important figures of American drama had great success. The success of the dramatists was based largely on the performance of the actors. The playwrights of the period also made their efforts to give the actors good stuff. These actors travelled throughout the year. They went from one country to another performing different plays.
In the nineteenth century the dramatists tried their hands on different types of plays like Spectacles, Pantomimes, Sketches, classical tragedies, Melodramas, comedies and burlesque etc. Most of these were derived from English and French sources. After the civil war dramatist’s interest in their own countries became deeper and they became more interested in the problems of their own countries. They were influenced by the changes in their own country.

It was, in fact, TN Harne that one comes across deliberate efforts to bring to drama a kind of artistic restraint which allowed the native drama the characters of a kind what was rare in the theatre. Though Harne’s work is quite melodramatic and though the dialogues are conventional, he succeeded in employing the language of common people. His plots are simple and not complicated. The fact that Harne gave serious thought to his art indicates a new spirit. He himself said, "If the artist has the truth to manifest, and if he can present without giving offence, he should do so. But if he chooses between wrong thing and receding from this position he should stand by his principle, and the truth, fearlessly." Some of the nineteenth century dramatists were closely associated with the theatre. David Balesco, William Balesco became some of the most prominent producers of the modern times. He began by writing or adapting a large number of conventional but effective melodramas. Balesco brought to his
plays extraordinary talent of a purely technical mind. But the excellence of his art lies in his dialogues.

At the advent of the twentieth century, the theatre was under the full domination of the Commercial Manager who was interested only in the profit. He did, not care for the prosperity of the Modern Art. Nevertheless there were hopeful signs. Some of them took care to restore health and vigour to the modern American drama. They tried to represent the American life realistically. They showed greater interest in the Modern Drama. They were inspired by an extended literary appreciation.

It may be noted that after the World War they were particularly interested in interpreting the characters and the major forces of the springs of contemporary life. Their ideas may not have been revolutionary as those of Ibsen and Bernard Shaw, they have something comparable to say to what has been expressed in other literary forms they have been more realistic than their predecessors not only in actual observation and report but also in the deep walls of psychology and motivation. In short they have attained dignity and maturity as artists.

There could, however, be seen some of the great dramatists who anticipated the dignity and the, interpretive creativity of the modern dramatic art.
Soon there appeared The Moscow Art Theatre. The playwrights like Gordon Craig came into light stimulated by an extended literary application and by a new artistic inspiration the various dramatists of note pointed out the new way of representing their contemporary American life. The most important among them were the playwrights who were called The Province Town Players like Eugene O’Neill. The Washington group could not abide long due to Great World War I. Different kinds of plays were also produced by the New York Theatre, the centre of the professional theatre. Before 1930 O'Neill, the most important of American dramatists always tried to re-interpret the nature of man and the forces that moved him. He experiment both on form and content in widely different plays like The Emperor Jones, Ana Christie, The Hairy Ape, Desire under the Elms, The Great God Brown and Strange Interlude.

After 1930 the American drama lacked spontaneous freshness. Even Eugene O’Neill did not gain success until The Iceman Cometh. In 1960 one could find America torn by social and political conflicts.

In the same atmosphere appeared Arthur Miller who has been widely accepted and recognised as one of the greatest dramatic artist America has ever produced. His reputation as a dramatic artist gave the modern American drama a new dignity and honour. His plays have been widely admired by people with
great delightful enthusiasm. Even in countries where English is not spoken people have enjoyed their artistic excellence.

A great deal of critical work has appeared about Arthur Miller in books, in literary journals in newspapers and magazines but no one has brought to light his very strong moral conscience, his sense of duty and responsibility and the consideration of the great truth that the individual is not more important than society.

Miller has acquired the status as one of the great intellectual leaders of America. He is highly liked as a lecturer and as a one who gave a glory to every intellectual and artistic function like seminars etc. His critical writing have much to add to such- various aspects of literature as realism and several theories of drama. The writer's role in the society and the individuals' responsibility in a complex society.

Arthur Miller has brought out a number of plays, the best liked of which are All My Sons and The Death of a Salesman. In addition a number of plays were written by him to present different facades of life.

Ever since he started writing he has always been, outspoken in his condemnation of the exploitation to which the ordinary man or woman is subjected in a system largely dominated by profiteering and self-centered Capitalists. He has often been known as a progressive writer on all aspects of social, economic
and political life. He was always a bitter critic of intolerance and war because he always believed that they always created new difficulties and new dangers. His plays have given a good expression to all this. For this radical idea he was summoned before a senate committee which was formed to investigate his anti-American activities. It was believed at that time that he had socialistic and communistic affiliations. Since then he decided not to give any thought or writing to the conditions of the time. As a matter of fact the books that he wrote about that time give the idea that he was very unhappy at the sufferings of the communists. In spite of all that he continued championing the cause of those who led a miserable life. He always condemned the exploitation of the poor by the rich. In view of all this it may be asserted that he was endowed by nature with great courage and was guided in all that he wrote or did with a strong humanitarian spirit. One can not help feeling the misery and suffering of those who led a life of poverty and misery. Any pitiable sight gave him an uneasiness of mind and heart.

While he was yet in his teens he had to confront a very painful event. It was a time when America was passing through a great ordeal. There was a very disastrous Depression which was responsible for the worst type of economic break down. Thousands of people were made jobless and fell a victim to frustration. The people had great faith in American economy. They
regarded America not only as the richest land but also a land of opportunities to everybody. But it had now turned into a land of misery and suffering, suffering particularly of the homeless poor. Arthur Miller was painfully influenced by it. In a way Depression was to him a great lesson which unfolded misery of many kinds. He saw in it a picture of life long social injustice and exploitation. He also made him aware of moral degradation. He himself said that "Depression was my book."³ In his book later published under the title of "Shadow of the Gods."⁴ Miller said to a number of his friends that Depression was a very forceful eye opener to him.

The poverty of an early life deprived him of strong faith in the old conventional lives. A critic has said, "Practically everything that had been said and done upto 1929 turned out to the fake."⁵ Miller was painfully disillusioned with the system. He saw such poverty that in his own words Miller makes reference to the hidden forces of life which are more powerful than the will or the effort of the individual. In the Greek tragedies one has a feeling that a man will always fall a victim to the forces which are always beyond his control. They are always hostile to his own actions and thinking Greeks called this force mystery or fate which was regarded as irresistible. It was true to say, "**Man Proposes God Disposes.**"⁶

In modern times the same force is called by another name. It is called Capitulation. It is the result of commercial values which
tends to eliminate man and shape his thoughts and ideas. But whereas the Greek drama depresses the individual there is regeneration in the modern drama. One deplores the fact that in the modern drama the excessive doom and pessimism, unrelieved by proper growth.

It may be noted that Miller made experiments with various theories and techniques like Realism, Expressionism, symbolism etc. But at the same time he knew that this is experimentation, it had a number of limitations. He firmly believes that the demands of the modern literary art are for a more free and effective mode than Realism. By the evidence of his plays, Shaw, the socialist was in love not with the working class whose characters he could only caricature but with the middle of the economic aristocracy, those men who in his estimate lived without social and economic illusions. There is a strain of mysticism fatalism in them so powerful as to throw all his scientific principles out.

Miller seems to have been in dramatic means to interrelate social and psychological mechanisms. In 1947 he said, "My development is toward an ever greater examination of human nature. So many people are talking about a new form. This to me is the evasion of the problem of playwriting which is a revolution of human motives regardless of forms."
A decade later he said, "However important considerations of style and form have been to me, they are only means, tools to pry up the well-worn envisionable surfaces of experience behind which swarm the living thoughts and feelings whose expression is the essential purpose of art, words only belie the tremendous concern." Miller is known for his tools throughout his career. If his examination of human nature has centred on a single subject, his metaphor, his methods have certainly undergone much modification. In the examination of some of his plays he displays those changing artistic strategies, and his continuous struggle with the technical questions, maintained by his theoric interests.

His introduction to the Collected Plays is of immense significance. In the Introduction he has revealed that there are three most important styles employed in the writing of modern plays: Realistic, Theatrical and Expressionistic. He says, "I have shown squarely conventional Realism." The truth of the statement is testified to by his major debt to Ibsen. In his plays a situation is never played, but revealed to us in form of action. The irrevocal debts in Ibsen helped man answer the biggest single problem: how to dramatise what has gone before: "What I was after, I was in fact what I was after." It implies that the consequences of actions are as real as actions. He said that when he wrote he tried to expand Realism in various forms in order to speak more directly of what had moved him behind the visible facades of life. From the
start of his career he wished to enrich the realistic style with an evaluation of life, a conscious and effective moral judgment. After completing the play entitled Who Had All the Luck Miller realised that he had not been able to accord theoretical or discursive presentation of his theme.

With the next play he determined to forge the sentiments that had not arisen naturally from the action. The Plan in All My Sons was to seek cause and effect, hard actions, the facts that the geometry of relation shapes, and to hold back any tendency to express an idea itself unless it was literally forced out of a character's mouth. He also felt that the most significant consequences comprising a character's inheritance from the past decisions might be mental and emotional, or physical.

In The Death of a Salesman, therefore, he made use of the impressionistic technique to express the passion residing behind the visible facades. Miller has himself said, "A play has broken the bounds of the point of view of an idea if he has broken the bounds of a long convention of Realism. He said that he had employed expressionism but always to create subject self. He had been attracted and repelled by the brilliance of the use of Expressionism by the Germans after the Great World War I, and the aim in The Death of a Salesman was to employ its quite brilliant shorthand for human characterisation rather than the purpose of demonstration for which the German dramatists had made use of it. The Short-
hand reproduced the psychology quite immediately represented the past events.

Arthur Miller's aim in his plays was to seek a compromise between moralism and realism. He says that the standards of right and wrong in the society as in Death of a Salesman can be seen as a compromise, preference for plays which aim at presenting life realistically. He has employed in this play both psychological realism and expressionism to get at the idea residing behind.

Miller made an experiment with expressionism and realistic styles because he had a desire to give to the objective truths an expression about a man living in society. He says as stated above our standards of right and wrong, good and bad, must in some way or the other come into conflict or harmonise with general social standards. According to him a writer's object ought to merge surfaces of experience, the object with cogent emotional life, and the subjective and philosophically or socially meaningful themes.

Miller was compelled to curtail his exploration of subjective process and to return to a more objective frame of reference. In Crucible he had thought of a kind of interior mechanism. But he was no longer interested in bringing out subjective plays. In his essays on social plays Miller says that by the time he wrote A View From the Bridge he had given up his theory of interior causation in favour of simple facts. He says that drama is like the other,
institutions of man in that it ought to help us to knew more, and not merely to spend our feelings. The ultimate justification for a genuine new form is the heightened consciousness it creates and makes possible a consciousness of causation in the light of known but hitherto inexplicable effects. Miller's aim as a dramatic artist has been to make real on the stage as in real life that part of man who through passion seeks awareness. He says that there is no conflict between the two.

In almost all his major plays one finds the accusation defence rhythm of a trial into their structure. Despite his wide-ranging experiments with form, the narrative schemes Man Who Had All the Week of All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A View from the Bridge and After the Fall are quite alike. In each work the hidden guilt is referred to indirectly, then it is unfolded in a climatic revelation. The secrets and the methods which they brought to light are praiseworthy.

Miller's construction is always flawless, never formless. He employs his metaphors in a very subtle manner. The dialogues, however, are both brilliant and interesting. The colloquial language has been used in such a manner as to glorify the whole performance; it is used in many languages-German, Sweden, Irish etc. One finds his greatest excellence as a dramatic artist in a treated, homespun talk which is generally unable to bridge the gap separating passion from former communication which covers
unspeakable humiliation, sorrow or rage, example Willy Lomans commonplace constructions fittingly define very important matters "He won't starve. None of them would starve." Charley advises Loman about Biff "Forget about him." But Loman replies in a simple manner, "then, what I have to remember." In her concluding remark Linda alludes to her financial insecurity, her efforts to keep home intact, and, above all, to her inability to comprehend her husband’s strange compulsion, "Why did you do it? I search, and search and I search, and I cannot understand it. I made the last payment today. And there will be nobody home. We are free."

Like every other play of Arthur Miller The Crucible also has some self-conscious oratory. But in no way does detract from the dynamics of character, theme and tension. The puritan language used by the dramatist is, indeed, not quite pleasant. But it becomes very impressive in its monosyllabic direct English Expression. Sometimes common man's language becomes very interesting emotionally appealing.

Like every other play in The Death of a Salesman also Miller's best attention is given to the problem facing the society. It will not be wrong to call it a social Tragedy. Here we find Miller preoccupied with an important problem the predicament of a common man in a rapidly advancing commercial society, the conflict between business ethics and the emotional relationship of
a family. The problem has been discussed in two acts. There is much report, much retrospective exposition and analysis and a fine impressive end.

Characters in the play are not like Hamlet and Macbeth. They are ordinary people. Linda, Loman's wife tells her sons: "Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name never appeared in the papers. He is not the finest character that ever lived. But he is a human being and a terrible thing is happening to him. He is not allowed to fall into death like a dead dog."15

It is really creditable that a man like Loman has won the sympathy of the audience. He is a salesman. Willy sympathetically represents all the common businessmen of America. He begins as a salesman. He lays emphasis on the social forces. Miller usually defends the employment; of the common man as a fit subject for tragedy in the highest sense. It says that rank or position does not display the greatness of a man. It is in the conflict that he gains size. The commonest man may take on that stature. The idea that a tragedy can be based on the lives of ordinary man is not a new experience in the world of drama. The common man struggles against the forces of society to secure his own place. There is the traditional form of tragedy. But the tragic nature of The Death of a Salesman does not follow the pattern. Willy Loman does not gain size from the particular situation. He comes before us as a victim of society. He does not make many comments on the society. It is
only at the end of the play that he makes poignant remark. It exposes the ugliness beneath the-glamour of commercial civilization. The play is one of the most severe indictments of American commercial civilization. America grows like a giant in unimaginable proportion. It is a huge machine revolving in crushing & circles. It is only the wealthy people who survive. Ordinary persons like Willy Loman fall a victim to disaster. The cruelty of the commercial society can be judged best from a person like Howard, Willy's boss. Willy who has worked for the firm for more than thirty years does not know what man is. As Willy says, "He (boss) eats the orange and throws the peel away."16

It is true that much of the suffering and misery has been caused by the commercial mechanism of America but it can not be denied that Willy himself is responsible for much of his suffering and misery. His offer of the woman in the hotel when he was surprised by Biff, constantly pricks his conscience. He is overwhelmed with the sense of guilt. He feels the sympathetic attitude when he looks at Linda darning his stockings for he had been away. He also feels that he himself is responsible for Biffs failure in life. This is the reason why he says, "I am responsible. Don't you dare blame on others? I won't take the rap, do you hear?"17 He thinks that Biff is not trying to reap success in any field of life because he hates him. His suspicion grows stronger when he goes out west to train horses and does not care to receive thirty
five dollars per week. Willy's wish is that a man should earn as much as, possible. Willy has grown contradictory, stating opposite ideas one after the other. Thus, soon he says that Biff endowed with all the qualities a man needs to have for success in life. Biff has a handsome personality and an attractive face. Willy has full faith in his ability and intrinsic qualities.

Miller employs an artistic technique in which action takes place both in the present and the past, the latter takes place in the mind of Willy. Miller makes use of the expressionistic technique. In view of the above Willy may be called The American Every man.

The dream element is quite pronounced. There is a large number of dreams in the play. He embraces every kind of dream and the dream of past guilt.

About characters in his plays Arther Miller himself says, "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy as King's and princes were." On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry which basis its analysis upon classic foundation such as Oedepus which were acted by royal beings but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. About the play The Death of a Salesman he says, "I was trying neither to condemn a profession nor I was particular to improve it. I admit I was a little better than ignorant of Freud's
teachings when I wrote this play. I made no attempt to bring down the American edifice, nor I raise it higher to show up family relations or to cure the ills of the individual institution. The truth is much simpler and more complex."

There are some critics who are of the opinion that The Death of a Salesman has no merit. The action outlines the mental and moral collapse leading to suicide of an aging travelling salesman who realises that he had based his life on false ideals. Miller had the makings of some sort of play, but he was unfortunately unable to bring out a spark of dramatic intelligence to bear on his material. The terms in which he conceived his themes are so trite and clumsy as to invalidate the entire play and render offensive its continual demand for the sympathy and indulgence of the audience. It proceeds with unrelieved vulgarity from cliche to stereotype. The language is entirely undistinguished. The parsonages are continually grunting and vehemently repeating the colloquials. The tone of the play can best be described as a sustained snivel. Ones would be justified if one suspects the author of The Death of a Salesman would have attained the same level of untalented and conscientious directness, if he had decided to write an epic poem or a novel instead of a play. Some of his critics have pointed out that Miller considers his new play to be the tragedy of a common man, it is not a tragedy nor it is about
any man, common or uncommon. It is pure Broad way in a self relying mood.

Despite what has been pointed out by the critics The Death of a Salesman is one of the greatest American plays. It was an instant success. It was hailed as a modern classic. It has assured to Miller a place among the foremost playwrights of the twentieth century. Miller always regarded man as a victim of the evils of a commercial society. At the same time it may be noted that Miller has also emphasised the fact that while he considers man as a victim of society he also lays emphasis on the fact that man is also responsible for his own sufferings and misery in the world. The aging salesman's dreams and fantasies of success and wealth are also responsible for his failure and disillusionment both in his professional and private life.

Miller makes a good use of music which symbolises the bucolic aspect of life which is one of the important themes in the play. It is for this reason that before any action starts on the stage, a flute is played and its melody is small and fine, telling of grass and trees, also of the horizon.

A large portion of the action of the play takes place in one day, that is, the last day of Loman's life. The different incidents are largely devoted to Willy Loman's life. They depict his past and present life. Thus, a major part of the play consists of actions in
retrospect. In his Introduction to the Collection of Plays Miller describes the technique as the form of confession, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then following some connections to a time twenty years ago. In other words, Miller's method is the dramatic equivalent of what is better known as the stream of consciousness.

As an expressionist Miller believes that the most significant consequences composing a character's inheritance from the events of the author's decisions might be both mental and emotional. They are not physical. In the Death of a Salesman he introduced expressionism; he gets at the passion behind the visible facades in the play.

As said above Miller was a sincere and sympathetic person. He did not believe in the injustice and exploitation of the poor. It can not be denied that he shook Realism which had been long settled. He himself employed expressionism in order to bring to light a subjective truth. He has no faith in the Garden of Eden that means that man is fallen by nature. It is also believed that man was sent to earth to undergo penance for the absolution of the sins committed by him in his previous life. On the other hand, he believes that the fall was a trick played upon Adam and Eve. They could not understand it. After having discussed in detail the contribution to Modern American Drama let us switch over to the next chapter, that is, the conclusion.