CHAPTER THREE

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

i) All My Sons

ii) Death of a Salesman

iii) A Memory of Two Mondays
"ALL MY SONS"

The play, "All My Sons" was premiered at the Cornet Theatre on January 29, 1947 and it was instantly recognized as "the best American play of the season" by the New York Drama Critics Circle for "its frank and uncompromising presentation of a timely theme, honesty of writing and accumulative power of the scenes."¹ The play serves as an important chapter in its author's life and it records a significant landmark in the progress of his dramatic career on the Broadway, particularly after the failure of the "The Man who Had All the Luck." It shows "genuine dramatic vitality" and "qualify him for acclaim as the post-war theatre's first playwright of magnitude."² By creating powerful scenes of confrontation, symbolic details and a central tragic conflict, Miller has made it "a fresh and exciting drama."³ The play has an urgency, an originality that argues well for Miller's future, "and it demonstrates his "social, and moral perceptions that permit his story to vibrate and expand."⁴

Looked at superficially, Miller's "All My Sons" appears to be simply a social thesis play. Such a classification is suggested both by timeliness of the story and by the presence of considerable overt social criticism.

M.W. Steinberg observes: "It is most simply and clearly in the tradition of the social problem plays of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy."¹ In his essay, Steinberg tends to reduce the play simply to the level of a social allegory by suggesting that the characters are mere illustrations of the forces working in "a selfish, materialistic society which respects economic success as it flaunts underlying moral law."² Similarly, Allan Stambusky remarks: "From the overall tone of 'All My Sons', Miller seems more concerned with advocating a thesis or some moral lesson than he is with portraying significant actions of characters in relation to one another which makes for truly tragic drama."³ It is certainly a social play, but it is not a thesis play in the manner of some of Ibsen’s early ones or like some plays of the thirties in America. Sidney Kingsley’s 'Ten Million Ghosts' (1936), dealing with munition makers can be called its forerunner. But, unlike 'Ten Million Ghosts', 'All My Sons' is not a play about war. It is much less an anti-war play. It is a play about social relationships and about the myopic vision of a selfish businessman who failed to recognize his social responsibility. It is not merely a tale of crime and punishment though apparently it seems to be just that, but a play about confrontation and commitment. Miller rightly points out:

2. Ibid.
... the crime in 'All My Sons' is not one that is about to be committed but one that has long since been committed. There is no question of its consequences being ameliorated by anything Chris Keller or his father can do; the damage has been done irreparably. The stakes remaining are purely the conscience of Joe Keller and its awakening to the evil he has done.

The last sentence is important. The play's tragic import is contained in that and can be traced from there. The situation is given. An irreparable damage has already been done. The hero cannot walk away from it. What remains is the awakening of his conscience to the horror of his deed. In this respect the play has some affinity with Shakespeare's Macbeth. Like Macbeth, Joe Keller, too, works his way to prosperity through unscrupulous and dishonest means. Although he lacks the sensitiveness of Macbeth and does not suffer like him the qualms of a guilty conscience, he does realize the full horror of his deed and cannot escape its tragic consequences. The evil outside Macbeth is in part represented by Lady Macbeth and in part by the witches. Macbeth himself has the seed of ambition which is played upon and nurtured by these external forces. Similarly in 'All My Sons', the private guilt of the individual is matched against the larger social evil. Social pressures from the outside world work upon Joe Keller and make him do what he does. Miller strikes a subtle balance between individual responsibility and social pressures. He actually believes that "a writer has got to show both these things in operation: both the

enormous pressure of circumstances and the individual act of choice."¹ In this whole process he "berates society for its stultification of the individual but he also scores the man as a threat to the society."²

'All My Sons' relates the story of Joe Keller, a small factory owner who, in order to save his wartime government contract, allows a number of cracked cylinder heads for airplane motors to be shipped to the Air Force. His hopes of escaping detection are shattered when twenty-one fliers crash to their deaths in the faulty planes and the damage is traced back to his plan. Although he escapes a long prison sentence by maneuvering his partner into taking the blame, everyone knows that he was equally guilty. But undaunted by the surreptitious whispering of his community, Joe returns to his business, rebuilds it, and by the time the war is over, is operating it smoothly and successfully.

When his son Chris returns from the Army, he suppresses his doubts about his father, and reenters the business. Eventually he becomes engaged to Ann Deever, the daughter of Joe's ex-partner and the financee of Chris's brother Larry, who was killed in the war. But their future is soon threatened and endangered by ghosts from the past. Mrs Keller opposes their marriage because she refuses to believe that Larry is really dead.

Relying increasingly on omens and astrological signs, she will not be swayed by the arguments of her husband and son. Still another cloud that hangs over Chris and Ann's future is the living spectre of her imprisoned father.

For the first half of the play, the attempts of Chris and Ann to overcome the obstacles to their relationship form the Central action. For a while they appear to be successful. With Joe's help they over-ride Mrs.Keller's objections; and even after Ann's brother George arrives, and tries to break up the engagement, the elder Keller placates him by convincing him that his father was solely responsible for shipping out the defective parts.

But the uneasy calm is soon shattered when an inadvertant comment by Joe about his health proves that the cold that supposedly kept him at home when the cylinder heads were sent out was a ruse. George storms out of the house, demanding that Ann follow him. Although she eventually rejoins Chris, their relationship suddenly becomes secondary as the dramatic emphasis shifts from Chris, Ann and Mrs. Keller to Chris and Joe; and the confrontation between the guilty father and the prosecuting son quickly explodes into the central conflict of the play.

With driving intensity the drama focuses on these two, as Joe desperately tries to justify his actions while Chris relentlessly and agonizingly allows him no quarter. But despite his son's attempts to make him comprehend the enormity on his act, not until Ann reveals
creates the necessity for the next. The social aspect of the problem it deals with, has been more sharply defined than in other plays. The Central event of the play is a businessman's evasion of responsibility during war time which leads to the death of twenty-one pilots. But the treatment of this social theme is not so naive as to disallow all considerations of the play as a tragedy. "Its socialness", in Miller's own words, "does not reside in its having dealt with the crime of selling defective materials to a nation at war." That, according to Miller, could have been the subject of a crime-thriller or a detective story. "It is that the crime is seen as having roots in a certain relationships of the individual to society." Which when not recognized can mean a jungle existence. No man can be an island unto himself and in this sense alienation can be socially meaningful.

In one of his early radio plays called 'Grandpa and the Statue', Miller touches upon the same question in a rudimentary manner and demonstrates the same theme that man needs society. Grandpa Monaghan refuses to contribute money for the pedestal of the statue of liberty. The play shows how he comes to realize that his decision was wrong. He realizes that he must be an integral part of the society in which he lives. 'All My Sons' deals an identical theme in a more serious manner through the perspective of a tragedy. Joe also thinks that he can prosper

2. Ibid., p.19.
3. Ibid.
a letter from Larry which discloses his intention of committing suicide on a combat mission as an atonement for his father's crime, does Joe Keller perceive the ultimate meaning of his deed. Finally taking full responsibility upon himself, he too seeks expiation in death.

'All My Sons' is the tragedy of a man who cannot see beyond his own family. Joe Keller, in this sense, has a myopic vision. He cannot see that a larger world exists outside his small family world. In caring too much for the prosperity and financial stability of his own family, he jeopardizes the safety and security of the society at large. Paradoxically his myopic vision is a gift of the same society against which he errs because it is based on the ethics of success. He is a product of the society, and also its enemy. His mind and psychology are shaped and distorted by the capitalistic economic system and the chief motivating force behind his short-sightedness is the success-code of the society which he thoughtlessly follows. The myth of success and its counterpart the failure, compel him to do what he does. He knows that a failure in society cannot survive, so, in order to survive in the world of competition, he takes recourse to dishonest means. The important thing from the viewpoint of tragedy, is that he lives on to realize his error. In the end, he realizes that he acted wrongly and was not simply acted upon.

In comparison with Miller's later plays, 'All My Sons' has a straightforward plot. It has "a method one might call linear or eventual in that one fact or incident
while others perish. He betrays his neighbour, Steve Deever, in the same manner as Eddie betrays his wife's relatives in 'A View from the Bridge' and thus violates the sanctity and harmony of social relationships. His betrayal is even more grave and heinous because he not only betrays his neighbour but also the nation at war. On the social level, it amounts to the betrayal of one's community, one's 'Polis' in the Greek sense of the word. As in the Greek tragedy, man who betrays his 'Polis' cannot prosper.

In terms of the Greek tragedy which Miller always kept in mind, the individual was to be at one with his society. Joe tragedy is that he is not "at one" with his society.

The central conflict in the play is between familial and social obligations. It has been rightly observed:

The thematic image of All My Sons is a circle within a circle, the inner depicting the family unit and the outer representing society, and the movement of the drama is concentric with the two circles revolving in parallel or bits until they ultimately coalesce. 1

To put it differently, the family and the society are like two pulleys, one smaller than the other but both joined together by a common axle so that the movement of one has a corresponding reaction on the other. The play depicts that man cannot disown society for his family. Keller does that. He isolates himself from others and thinks that his family can prosper at the expense of society. He does not see beyond his sons and his own family. What he says about

his dead son, Larry, is actually true of himself:

To him the world had a forty-foot front. It ended at building line. 1

He has a fanatic allegiance to a dream on which his family is centred. The tragedy occurs when he holds blindly to this dream and fails to recognize his place in society or when he gives up that place for the sake of his family dream. His trouble "is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." 2 He is neither malignant nor villainous but one-sided and myopic. He is genuinely unable to foresee the public consequences of a private act. In order to appreciate this flaw in his character it is important to understand his background and his profession.

He is a stolid and unintellectual businessman. He is also "an uneducated man for whom there is still wonder in many commonly known things" 3 When the play opens he is discovered with a newspaper in hand. When asked about the news he says, "I don't read the news part any more. It's interesting in the want ads." 4 A few minutes later, he reads "wanted - Old dictionaries. High prices paid," and says, "Now what's a man going to do with an old dictionary?" 5 Chris enters after sometime and wants to read the book section of the newspaper. The following conversation ensues:

5. Ibid., p. 60.
Keller: What is that, every week a new book comes out?
Chris: Lot of new books.
Keller: All different?
Chris: All different.¹

Kellers says, "I don't know, everybody's getting Goddam educated in this country.... It's a tragedy: You stand on the street today and spit, you are going to hit a college man."² He does not understand the difference between "Brooch" and "Broach" All this helps us understand his character and the low cast of his mind. He is an unimaginative and unlettered man. His actions have to be judged in the light of this background. Just as our knowledge of Willy Loman as a Salesman and of Eddie Carbone as a Longshoreman helps us understand their psychology, our knowledge of Joe as an uneducated and unscrupulous businessman helps us judge his true character. His myopic vision is the product of his unenlightened mind in just the same way as Hamlet's philosophical vision is the product of his analytical mind. Chris confronts him at the end of Act II and asks him one question repeatedly: "Dad, you did it?"³ Keller pleads ignorance and speaks in a cracking voice: "I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop them before anybody took off."⁴ He acts without the knowledge of the public consequences of his action. He also acts under

¹ Miller, Arthur. "All My Sons", Collected Plays, p.64.
² Ibid., p.94.
³ Ibid., p. 114.
⁴ Ibid., p. 115.
a kind of fear-psychosis generated by socio-economic pressures. The fear of losing his business and thus becoming a failure spawns a crisis of character in him. In a crucial speech he tells this to his son:

I'm in business, a man is in business a hundred and twenty cracked, You're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work you're out of business ....... they close you up! they tear up your contracts, what the hell's it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away? 1

It brings to mind Willy's famous speech in 'Death of a Salesman' where he implores Howard Wagner, his employer, for a job. He says:

I put thirty four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit! 2

Joe Keller acts under terrible pressures of a success-oriented society. He is afraid of reporting the defect or holding the supply of airplane engines because that will ruin his business and consequently the future of his sons. He tells his son:

Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you. 3

An excess of love for his sons makes Keller succumb to the socio-economic pressures of society. The only motivation with him at the moment is to provide to his sons a future based on substantial wealth. He tells Chris: "What the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shooting match is for your." 4 Keller is called upon to play

4. Ibid., p.69.
his role as a father on the one hand and as a citizen on
the other, but his one sidedness and disproportionate alle­
giance to his family make him ignore his role as a citizen.
Miller explains this point as under:

In All My Sons Joe Keller is a father and a citizen
but because he could not take the citizen side
seriously he became less of a father and destroyed
his own children. You literally have to survive
with this whole because you can't survive without
it. 1

In this respect 'All My Sons's looks forward to 'Incident
at Vichy'. The main idea in both the plays is that respon­
sibility is not just a matter of personal relationships;
it must also extend to the world at large. Joe's tragedy
is that he does not understand this. He remains ignorant
of the implications of his family centricity; not until the
end of the play does he realize "the full loathsomeness of
an anti-social action." 2 Throughout the play he cannot
think in terms of images other than filial or familial
which is amply revealed in the following conversation
between him and his wife:

Mother: There's something bigger than the family to him(Chris)
Keller : Nothing is bigger!
Mother : There is to him.
Keller : There's nothing he could do that I wouldn't
forgive him. Because he is my son. Because I'm
his father and he's my son.... Nothing is bigger
than that..... I'm his father and he's my son,
and if there's something bigger than that I'll
put a bullet in my head! 3

When finally made to realize that there is something bigger than the family, that those who were killed (in Joe's own words) "were all my sons", he does put a bullet in his head.

Tragedy builds itself slowly in the play along the lines of this central conflict between the familial and the social. It is difficult to agree with Barry Gross who says that Miller ignores the larger social context in 'All My Sons'. To quote Barry Gross, "In Miller's play the foreground the Keller family occupies looms too large, so large as to obliterate any other context which might or should be behind or around it."¹ In fact, the play gradually leaps out of the family circle into the larger social circle; What Miller himself says of Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town' can be said of 'All My Sons':

The preoccupation of the entire play is...... the society, and no primarily this particular family—and every stylistic means used is to the end that the family foreground be kept in its place, merely as a foreground for the larger context behind or around it.²

The father and son conflict in the play is yet another variation of the same conflict between the familial and the social. The family serves as a "symbolic cell" of the social structure. In the former version of the play, we are told³ Miller had given the major role to Kate Keller and her astrological beliefs and the original title of the play was 'The Sign of the Archer' but that did not succeed because the

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main conflict of the play did not emerge. "As the play progressed", says Miller "the conflict between Joe and his son Chris pressed astrology to the wall."¹ It is the backbone of the play. The confrontation between the father and the son actually springs from Chris's awareness of responsibility to others and his father's character. The antithetical nature of the two is made clear in the very beginning. He is an idealist whose entire allegiance is to the society. He tells his father:

I don't know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to put back because other people will suffer. ²

Chris's concern for others has been polarized against his father's lack of concern for others. "The business", he says, "the business doesn't inspire me"³ He stands in direct contrast to his father. Dr. Jim Bayliss, their neighbour, says about Chris to his mother. "It takes a certain talent - for lying. You have it, and I do. But not him."⁴ Joe himself aptly sums up Chris's moral character in a moment of anger when he says..... "everything bothers him. You make a deal, overcharge two cents, and his hair falls out. He don't understand money".⁵ Thus Chris virtually serves as a foil to Joe. Set against Joe's myopic vision is Chris's egalitarian vision. He tells Ann that a realization dawned upon him when he was in command of a company during the war:

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³ Ibid., p.69.
⁴ Ibid., p.118.
⁵ Ibid., p.121.
It'd been raining several days and this kid came to me and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That's only a little thing—but... that's the kind of guys I had. They didn't die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little selfish and they'd've been here here today. And I got an idea watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of responsibility. Man for man. 1

But afterwards when he comes home from the war, he finds it all different. He feels ashamed "to be alive, to open the bankbook, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator because he feels it is "really loot and there's blood on it". The revelation of his father's guilt comes as a shock to him. He says:

I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father (Almost breaking): I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself! 3

Through a number of speeches he lacerates his father. The dominant features of these speeches is the bestial imagery which is deliberately used, it seems, to suggest that human civilization is retreating into a jungle existence. The crisis breaks upon Chris when he thinks in terms of society and civilization. He says bitterly:

This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him! That's the principle; the only one we live by—it just happened to kill a few people that time, that's all. The world is that way, how can I take it out on him. What sense does that make? That is a zoo, a zoo! 4

This is certainly an appalling vision of the society. The agony of Chris is a dominating feature of the play. In his

2. Ibid., p.85.
3. Ibid., p. 125.
4. Ibid., p.124.
idealism he reminds us to Prince Hamlet. He too, like Hamlet, confronts a world which is full of evil and betrayal. In his speech, there is the same note of questioning that we find in Hamlet's soliloquies. In fact, the interrogative note of his speeches heightens the tragic import of the play because it touches upon such questions of human behaviour, choice and responsibility that form the true subject of tragedy.

Miller has maintained the tight structure of the play. Its three acts portray action which is roughly limited to eighteen hours, from Sunday morning to the early hours of Monday. The scene of action throughout is the backyard of the Keller home. The dismal shades of the impending disaster are felt from the very opening scene. The powerful image of the broken apple tree whose upper braches lie toppled with fruit still hanging on to them, is not only suggestive of Larry's premature death but also forebodes the final catastrophe that is in the offing.

There may not be a depiction of prolonged suffering in the play as it is in 'Death of a Salesman' but there is an overwhelming feeling of loss and grief. Keller's better self asserts itself strongly at the end and when it is does, he becomes tragic. His devotion to his sons is quite like that of Willy Loman who smashes his car only to make his sons rich. Joe is also committed to the welfare of his children but the moment his humanity asserts itself over his selfish money interests he shoots himself. There is the same single-minded pursuit of an
illusion in his case as in the case of Willy Loman. He too, has the same vehemence of a tragic hero and holds firmly with an absolute commitment to the welfare of his sons. Like Loman again, there is the same compulsive drive towards death. The moment he discovers the grossness and magnitude of his crime he takes a plunge and dies.

The most interesting feature of the play is how an antisocial character is treated as a tragic hero. This is done by focussing on his human aspect as against his commercial side so that we do not completely lose sympathy for him. All the time we are made aware that even his antisocial activities have behind them the human motivation of a father's love for his sons. As our sympathies are not completely lost for Macbeth even though he becomes a murderer, our sympathies for Joe are never alienated. It is essential humanity in both which keeps them away from becoming villains in our eyes and it is ultimately the assertion of their humanity against their debasement that makes them tragic.

Tragic irony, which is important future of tragedy, can be found at work in the play. The wide gap between Joe's dream of a happy and wealthy future for his family and the reality as it is underscores the ironic nature of the situation. What is still ironic is that his hopes are frustrated by his own sons for whom he worked. Larry, as a result of the ignominy he feels on account of his father's culpability, kills himself; Chris turns violently against him when he discovers the reality. Joe is ironically destroyed by his own weapons. Both his sons, whom he loved more than all the world, become the instruments
of his punishment. Larry's deliberate suicide is a mode of revenge upon his father. In a frank confession before his death Larry wrote to Ann: "I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel- I can't bear to live any more..... Every day three or four men never come back and he sits there doing business."¹ The discovery of Larry's letter at the last minute looks like a chance device but such chance devices are not uncommon even in Shakespeare. It certainly carries the verdict of the dead son and cuts him more sharply than the long-winded harangue, of Chris. Joe achieves tragic realization, however crudely, and admits, "they were all my sons".² This realization is too strong to keep him alive. He goes inside and shoots himself. His ultimate suicide is an act of self-purification. It is a way of coming to terms with his family and the society at large. Miller does not show him as a victim of the hostile world since that would make him a pathetic figure rather than a tragic one. Society or social forces play a crucial role in as much as they mould his thinking and make him materialistic in his outlook but he is not a passive victim of these forces. His suicide sets a seal on his heroism and provides a rich tragic import to the play.

'All My Sons', in its last analysis is not simply a domestic play. Within the structure of a family drama, Miller raises larger social issues and morality. The play leaps out of the family structure and deals with man's place and role in society. The theme of the play

². Ibid., p.126.
assumes great social significance and can be summed up in Miller's own words: "how men ought to live". The treatment of this theme provides magnitude to the plot of the play and makes it worthy of recognition as a tragedy.
'Death of a Salesman' stands apart from almost all of Arthur Miller's other works. The play has been called "the most powerful dramatic creation" of the post-second world-war period which propelled Miller into the forefront of his profession. The play is a "fine thing, finely done and vastly well delivered." It "made its debut and walked away with both the Pulitzer and the Drama Critic Award for 1949." When the play was performed on Broadway for the first time in 1949, it received a standing ovation and unexpected applause because" it moved its audience tremendously, came closer to their experience, awakened their consciousness and even aroused them to self-criticism". The audience on its way to exit showed their faces" stained with tears" and their eyes reflected inner gloom and depression.

Robert Garland, a New York drama critic, recorded the response at the final curtain fall. "Then, believe me, tumultuous appreciation shattered the hushed expectancy." Arthur Miller, the playwright, had in fact been successful in reminding the audience, in two hours, of the instability, insecurity and reality of their own

existence and identity through "simple images" from the life of a little salesman in Brooklyn. "All I was doing was bringing things to mind. The assumption also, was that everyone know Willy Loman.... There was.... no bringing together hitherto unrelated things; only pre-existing images, events, confrontations, moods, and pieces of knowledge...of I had wanted, then, to put the audience reaction into words, it would not have been "what happens next and why?" so much as "oh, God, of course." 1 Its 742 performances put it among the fifty longest recorded Broadway runs and "by common consent," writes Brooks Atkinson," it is one of the finest drama in the whole range of American theater." 2 Bentley the erudite drama critic, who had assailed 'All My Sons', as being serious "in intent only" called 'Death of a Salesman' "a signal event" 3 in the American theatre. Neil Carson bestows his frank eulogy upon the play and the playwright when he says:

"Nothing in The Man Who Had All The Luck or 'All My Sons' prepared New York audiences for the quite extra-ordinary achievement of Salesman; and many critics have never forgiven the playwright for not repeating the triumph." 4

It appears to be an interesting paradox, that perhaps, no other play of our times has generated as much controversy and appreciation as Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman'. The play has been vehemently
criticised for the tragic stature of its hero, who is not only common place and mediocre but also a victim of the materialistic society. Critics further opine that since its hero is not pitted against certain irresistible universal forces, as the heroes of great tragedies are, it is at best a play of social protest rather than a successful tragedy. Eleanor Clark, for instance, views it as an attack on capitalism: "It is, of course, the capitalist system that has done willy in; the scene in which he is brutally fired after some forty years with the firm comes straight from the party line literature of the thirties."¹ "The plan" according to Clark, "with its peculiar hodge-podge of dated materials and facile new ones, is not tragedy at all but an ambitious piece of confusionism."² For Harold Clurman the death of Miller's salesman is "symbolic of the breakdown of the whole concept of salesmanship inherent in our society".³ Thomas E. Porter regards the play as "the story of the failure of the success myth."⁴ Similarly, William Beyer asserts that the play "makes pertinent comment on the decadent values in our society."⁵ Refuting the charge that 'Death of a Salesman' is a propaganda play, Watts remarks: "it manages to go so deep into contemporary values that

it becomes a valid and frightening social criticism."¹ Herbert J. Miller's estimate of the play is that it merely tells the story of "a little man succumbing to his environment, rather than a great man destroyed through his greatness."² Yet another critic says that "Willy is not only common socially, he is also common intellectually and spiritually....Divested of his pseudopoetic fancies, he is a paltry man who has lived for and among paltry things and has developed paltry values and standards."³

In fact, the social element in the play, which is so obvious and imposing, has led the critics to surmise that the play is not a tragedy. Again, it is an overemphasis on the sociological aspect of the play which makes so many scholars look upon Willy as a paltry little man done to death by a cruel society. Is Willy really a pathetic victim of the social forces, or is he himself, in part at least, responsible for the catastrophe that overtakes him? Is not the capitalistic economy an insufficient basis to explain Willy's death? This is so especially because Charley, his next door neighbour, is living prosperously in the same economic system. Social pressures do play a part, but Willy the individual is equally responsible for his failure as a salesman. He is a man whose illusions have made him incapable of

coping with the realities of life. The society in which he lives and the social forces that work upon him have, no doubt, spawned these illusions in him but he is not just a passive victim of a hostile system. He is active throughout and, like a traditional tragic hero, swollen by self-conceit too.

The ambivalent relationship between man and society dramatized in this play has been chiefly responsible for the erroneous descriptions of the play as a tragedy. Referring to the conflicting aims of the play, Eric Bentley, for instance, observes: "The tragedy destroys the social drama; the social drama keeps the 'tragedy' from having a genuinely tragic stature."¹

A part of this confusion can be dispelled if we see tragedy as an outgrowth of the traumatic experience of the protagonist and a crisis in the society. There is an interaction between the two which imparts tragic force to social drama and underscores the social nature of tragedy. Raymond Williams' observation, though made in a different context, provides a useful insight into this ambiguity:

"Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the play of life. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms."²

Willy Loman, the salesman, is an appropriate image of humanity retreating from reality and desperately trying to place its faith in appearances and outworn cliches of Horatio Alger and Dale Carnegie. The society portrayed in 'Death of a Salesman' is clearly a visualisation of the American Dream. Willy thinks that his son, Biff, must succeed in "the greatest country in the World" because he is "a young man with such personal attractiveness". Willy has always laid too much store by the appearances; which ultimately becomes the cause of his undoing. He tells his sons:

"Bernard can get the best marks in school, Y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, Y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him, That's why I thank, Almighty God. You're both built like Adonis. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want." 2

Temperamentally, Willy is so different. The moment he enters the stage, Miller uses three important phrases to describe his character; namely, "his mercurial nature," "his massive dreams", and "the turbulent longings within him." 3 These three phrases provide enough insight into an understanding of Willy's character, his actions and pursuits in life. He had massive dreams both about himself and his son, Biff. For instance, he tells his sons: Someday I will have my business, and

2. Ibid., p. 146.
3. Ibid., p. 131.
I'll never have to leave home any more.¹ He lives on sensations and likes to create sensations about himself. He became a salesman on being inspired by a sight of Dave Singleman who at the age of eighty-four, "put on his green velvet slippers", "pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living."²

Throughout his life, Willy tries to project an inflated image of himself in a bid to impress his sons. He tells them, "I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own,"³ the following conversation between Willy and his sons amply prove this:

BIFF : Where'd you go this time, Dad?

Willy : Well, I got on the road, and I went north to Providence. Met the Mayor.

Biff : The Mayor of Providence!

Willy : He was sitting in a hotel lobby.

Biff : What did he say?

Willy : He said, "Morning" And I said, you got a fine city here, Mayor," And then he had coffee with me.⁴

This interesting piece of conversation suggests clearly the extent to which Willy is capable of self-deception. It also suggests the yawning gap between an ordinary man's pipedreams and the sordid

². Ibid., p. 180.
³. Ibid., p. 145.
⁴. Ibid., pp. 144-45.
reality; that is, Willy as he would have liked himself to be and Willy as he is. In fact, the anguish of Willy springs from his pose of bigness vis-a-vis the reality that he is a small fry. On the one hand, he tries to impress his boys with stories of his contacts with big people; on the other, he confesses his heart to Linda: "You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me. They seem to laugh at me."1 At one place he tells his sons: "I never have to wait in line to see a buyer, Willy Loman is here; 'That's all they have to know, and I go right through"; at another he is discovered flirting with a woman who says, "I'll put you right through to the buyers".2

Willy assumes the airs of a very big man before his sons because that is exactly how he would have imagined himself to be, but he cannot hide for long his real position. His trouble is that he can never live with reality. The gap between Willy's hopes and the reality contains the essential tragic irony of the play. It has been forcefully used to build up the tragic effect. The same gap is noticeable in Willy's dreams about his son, Biff whom he views not as a mortal but "Like a young god. Hercules—something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him."3 But the reality turns out to be the opposite of his dreams, Biff proves an utter failure. They boy whom Willy expected to be "five

2. Ibid., p. 146.
3. Ibid., p. 171.
times a head of Bernard" fails miserably, while Bernard, whom he considered a "pest" and an "anaemic", proves a success. The poignant irony, working as a tragic force, helps underscore the gap between promise and fulfilment, and brings the play in the line with other great American tragedies. The ironic gap between promise and fulfilment is reinforced through many speeches in the play. For instance, Willy tells Linda: "Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken." But in a life, beset with tragic possibilities, it is like trying to catch the mirage. Willy too comes to realize it when he says: "Figure it out, work a life time to pay off a house. You finally own it and there's nobody to live in it." The dramatic irony of Willy's remark finds its confirmation in Linda's last words over Willy's grave:

Willy dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today, Today, dear, And there'll be nobody home.

It is important to understand that the play opens when Willy's dreams have already been shattered. The entire action on the stage is confined to the last one day of the salesman's life. When Willy first enters we notice that there is something wrong with him. He cannot drive steadily; he stops at a green light; when it is red, he goes. He seems exhausted and fatigued.

2. Ibid., p. 133.
3. Ibid., p. 222.
He tells his wife: "I'm tired to the death.... I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda". Miller use ironically the very emblems of success to symbolise his defeat. The speeding car, for example, which is a symbol of material success and rate-race competition, is used to suggest Willy's loosening" grip on the force of life." Willy says he could not hold the steering of the car steadily and it "kept ogoing off onto the shoulder." Similarly, Miller also uses Willy's house as a symbol. "The small fragile-seeming" house of Willy is surrounded on all sides by "towering, angular shapes" symbolising a constant threat to the life of its inhabitants. Thus, the opening scene contains enough that forebodes the ensuing catastrophe. It sets the tragic tone of the play. "The rest of the play is the fearful spectacle of watching the under-pinnings of Willy's already broken world shatter one by one." 

The reversal of fortune or peripeteia has already taken place before the play begins, and the stage is left wide open for "the disintegration of the hero's psyche." The critics who complain about Willy's lack of awareness fail to see that the play's climax actually comes in the beginning. Willy, it appears, is living only a posthumous existence. The pressure of his failure is so great that he is bound to destroy himself. Here Miller's

2. Ibid., p. 132.
4. Ibid., p. 95.
own remark is pertinent: "I was convinced that if I could make him remember enough, he would kill himself."\(^1\) Miller exploited to full advantage the technique of a memory play so as to bring about an effective juxtaposition of the past and the present in Willy Loman's mind. Later, Miller uses an identical method in 'After the Fall' and discusses it in an interview with Ronald Hayman:

"In one the event is inside the brain and in the other the brain is inside the event."\(^2\) This form of the memory play suits the tragic design. Loman is not victimized or killed by a hostile society alone (that might have made him a pathetic little innocent victim); the pressure of his own failure is so great upon his mind that it erupts like a volcano and propels him towards suicide. In the words of Don Vogel, "It is not what the society demands that makes the action, it is what willy thinks it demands, and that is the unpreventable element that is the all-powerful motivation of his tragedy, as it was for Oedipus in his situation."\(^3\)

The effectiveness of 'Death of a Salesman' as a tragedy stems from its central conflict - the conflict between the individual and the social forces. Unlike American plays of the thirties, it never becomes hortatory in tone. Despite its social implications, the play is mythical rather than documentary; that is to say, it is not

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a problem play in the traditional sense but a tragedy. Like Oedipus the King, Miller's play dramatizes the problem of man's existence in a flawed society and thus acquire mythical proportions in its tragic apprehension of life. Stripped to its bare essentials the story of Willy Loman is comparable to that of Oedipus:

"An aged king-apious man-moves toward life's end. Instead of reaping the benefits of his piety, he finds himself caught in bewildering circumstances. Because of a mistake—an error in judgement—a tragic reversal has taken place in his life. Where he has been priest, knower of secrets, wielder of power and symbol of life, he now finds himself adjudged defiler, usurper, destroyer, and necessary sacrifice. Like the traditional hero, Loman begins his long season of agony. In his descent, however, there is the familiar tragic paradox; for as he moves toward inevitable destruction, he acquires that knowledge that sense of reconcilation, which allows him to conceive a redemptive plan for his house." 1

The essential paradox of tragedy lies in that Willy, like Oedipus, finds it difficult to walk away from the central conflict. In Miller's own words, "the capable a man is of walking away from the central conflict of the play, the closer he approaches a tragic existence." 2 Bernard does suggest it to him: "But sometimes, Willy, it's better for a man just to walk away." Willy replies "But if you can't walk away?" 3 That is always the difficulty with a tragic hero, be it Oedipus or Hamlet or Willy Loman. He can neither settle for half nor simply walk away. He is a committed person and "the

3. Miller, Arthur, 'Death of a Salesman', p. 190
closer a man approaches tragedy the more intense is his concentration of emotion upon the fixed point of his commitment."¹ Willy Loman John Proctor, Eddie Carbone etc. All achieve tragic dignity because they refuse to compromise.

The central conflict of 'Death of a Salesman' is dramatized in the play on two levels—the domestic and the social—which are interrelated. On the level of society, Willy is struggling as a salesman and is trying to regain his lost image. The crucial scene with Howard epitomizes his whole struggle on this level. He tells his employer: "I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance: You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away— a man is not a piece of fruit."² In this scene we find Willy the salesman selling himself, rather under-selling himself. He starts with "sixtyfive dollars a week," then lowers it to "fifty dollars a week" and finally comes down to "forty dollars a week".³ The basic question involved here is: "how can a person keep his sense of right and wrong while grappling for a living in a business world which recognizes only the principle of the survival of the fittest?"⁴ In this whole struggle for survival, the anguish and suffering of Willy's heart are revealed. He is sixty-three years old, and yet this struggle has not ended. In his desperate effort "to make

³. Ibid., pp. 179-81.
a home of the outside world" (the outside world is represented by Howard Wagner in this scene), Willy, appeals to Howard in familial terms: I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms," and again, "your father came to me the day you were born and asked me what I thought of the name of Howard." But the callousness of industrial society symbolised by the wire-recording machine cuts right across Willy's dream world. Howard is evidently more interested in the recorded voices of his son, daughter and wife than in Willy's talks. When he finally hears Willy, he turns down the old man's request for a stationary job by saying "it's a business kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight." On Howard's exit, Willy accidentally switches on the recorder, and instantly

Howard's son: ".... of New York is Albany. The Capital of Ohio is Cincinnati the capital of Rhode Island is...."

Willy gets terrified and shouts for help as if he had been over-powered by some monster: "Ha! Howard: Howard Howard:"

Howard rushes in and pulls the plug out.

He immediately fires Willy: "I don't want you to represent us I've been meaning to tell you for long time now."

This little incident dramatizes effectively the critical relationship of the individual with the industrialized society. 'Death of a Salesman' has been rightly described as "the most nearly mature myth about human

2. Ibid., p. 180.
3. Ibid., p. 181.
5. Ibid., p. 182.
suffering in an industrial age."¹ In the image of the salesman Miller has brought into the theater "a figure who is, in our age, a kind of hero—a ritual representative of an industrial society."² Society in this case serves as a force that provides magnitude of plot and character to the tragedy of Willy Loman. The tragic irony, can, once again, be seen at work if we recall that Willy in the preceding scene admonishes Biff, preparing him to face an interview with Bill Oliver. Besides, when he leaves his house, he has big hopes and tells Linda: "I'm gonna knock Howard for a loop, kid. I'll get an advance, and I'll come home with a New York job. Goddammit, now I'm gonna do it."³ Instead he not only fails in his own interview with Howard, but also loses his job. All his hopes and aspirations end in smoke.

Another level of conflict in the play is apparently personal and domestic. On this level, the conflict takes place between the father and the son. But even this familial struggle between the two has larger social implications. Willy represents the culture of the business world; he constantly tries to inject the same into his sons' minds as well. Happy does in fact turn out to be a carbon copy of his father. But Biff, who has been a football player, represents a more atheletic, healthy and primitive culture. He finds life on a farm more attractive.

¹. Jackson, Esther Merle. 'Death of a Salesman: Tragic Myth' p.64.
². Ibid., p. 64.
³. Miller, Arthur. 'Death of a Salesman', p. 175.
He likes to whistle in the elevator or take his shirt off and swim in the middle of the day. In other words, Biff likes everything opposite to Dale Carnegie's doctrine of keeping up appearances which Willy practices. The conflict, thus, between Willy and Biff is not merely a conflict between two cultures—the urban and commercial culture on the one hand, the pastoral and agrarian on the other. The hollowness and falsehood of the former is revealed to Biff when he discovers his father, whom he always looked upon as an ideal, with a half-naked woman in a room of the Baston hotel. Biff looks at her "open mouthed and horrified". Willy tries to convince him by making all kinds of flimsy excuses: "This is Miss Francis, Biff, she's a buyer. They're painting her room. Go back, Miss Francis, go back". But Biff's faith in his father is shattered. In a reply to Willy's "I'll see Birnbaum first thing in the morning," Biffsays, "He would not listen to you." He leaves crying and calls Willy: "You phony little fake:" 

Biff loses faith in his father. He comes back to his room the same day, burns his sneakers, and thus puts an end to bright career in sports. Thereafter, they are never able to trust each other. Biff knows the reality about his father: Willy also knows that Biff knows his secret. Willy feels guilty and thinks that Biff hates him for it. As a result of all this, a latent hostility develops.

1. Miller, Arthur. 'Death of a Salesman', p. 207.
2. Ibid., p. 208.
3. Ibid., p. 190.
between them, which springs to surface whenever they confront each other. Even Linda refers to it without knowing its background when she asks Biff:

"When you write your'e coming, he's all smiles and talks about the future and—he's just so wonderful. And then the closer seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing and he seems angry at you..... why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that?"

Willy struggles desperately to regain his fatherhood. Almost unconsciously, after he has been rejected by the business world, Willy takes recourse to farming by planting seeds at midnight in the backyard of the house. This again is certainly ironic because all his life he has been opposing tooth and nail the idea of farming. The night plantation scene is important from the view point of tragedy as well for it suggests that after a lifetime of hard struggle and suffering, Willy discovers that "nothing is planted." He can see that the "Woods are burning." He makes a last vain attempt, at the fag end of his life, to plant something in the ground. The tragic sense of loss and waste spawned by this scene heightens the tragic intensity of the play. It also brings to mind Miller's remark that the play "grew from simple images."

Most important of all the images that he mentions is "the image of a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumb print some-where on the world. A need for immorality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's fame on a cake of ice

on a hot July day." The desire to leave a thumbprint and the realization that it is a vain attempt constitute the essence of tragedy in 'Death of a Salesman'. Willy knows "a man can't go out the way he came in, a man has got to add up to something." He makes an heroic effort to add up to something, but the irony is that he is already too late for it.

The tragic tension reaches its climax in the last scene of the play when Biff makes a determined attempt to make his father face the "fact." He tells Willy: "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house." Still further he says, "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you! ...... I am not leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ashcan like the rest of them." Tempers pick up high between them and finally Biff breaks down crying. The revelation then dawns upon Willy. He feels astonished and elevated:

Willy (after a long pause, astonished, elevated): Isn't that-ain't that remarkable? Biff—he likes me! .... He cried! Cried to me. (He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise): That boy—that boy is going to be magnificent!

The moment of tragic awakening is reached when Willy discovers that he is loved by Biff. "In this he is given his existence," says Miller, "his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he

3. Ibid., p. 216.
4. Ibid., p. 217.
5. Ibid., p. 218.
could not achieve. John Gassner rightly observes:

"Willy, who is otherwise so unimpressive, is translated into a father for whom the love and success of his favourite son, Biff, is a paramount necessity and a consuming passion. He has been made into a dramatically charged father-hero, and as such becomes a heroic figure in active pursuit of father-son ideal. He may be a fool, but he becomes a monolithic figure of some tragic dimension in this aspect. This man as a failure even as a bourgeois recalls somewhat the obsessed and self-consuming heroes of Elizabethan tragedy." 2

This discovery proves too much for Willy, so he decides to sacrifice his life for Biff’s success. He calls upon his dead brother, Ben, who continues fitting through his memories as an incarnation of an act. In this moment of enlightenment Willy is able to see that "he can prove his existence only by bestowing 'power' on his posterity, a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy." 3

He finally knows what he has to do and he happily goes ahead and does it.

Unlike his earlier attempts at suicide, Willy’s final suicide is an act of self-assertion and triumph because it is not motivated by cowardice or despair; rather it is purposeful, joyful and epitaphic. In the words of Esther Merle Jackson, "Loman’s suicide, like Oedipus’ self-blinding or Antigone’s self murder is obviously intended as a gesture of hero’s victory over circumstances. It is an act of love, intended to redeem his house." 4 In a moment of tragic awareness, Willy sacrifices his life for the supreme passion of love. It

1. Miller, Arthur. 'Introduction', p. 34.
3. Miller, Arthur. 'Introduction', p. 34.
sets a seal on the heroism of his spirit and makes 'Death of a Salesman' one of the best twentieth century tragedies.

In its last analysis 'Death of a Salesman' is a new kind of tragedy, which eschews the splendour and grandeur of an Elizabethan tragedy like King Lear, but broaches the same fundamental questions of "social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular toward the fate of generality of men." It depicts man struggling against social forces and trying to attain a place for himself in the society that should be in tune with his idea of self respect. It also shows how man's dreams of success and glory are blown away under the pressures of society. However, in this whole process man transcends mediocrity and achieves tragic dignity. In 'Death of a Salesman' Miller succeeds in transforming social drama into a powerful modern tragedy.

"A MEMORY OF TWO MONDAYS"

'A Memory of Two Mondays' is Miller's 'simplest play' and 'an admirable one - act drama' which portrays, like 'All My Sons' and 'Death of a Salesman', the retarding and dismal impact of social pressure on the lives of individuals. The play powerfully dramatizes the lives of automobile parts warehouse workers, who are exposed to the pressures of an industrial infrastructure which serves for them as a deadening and maddening trap of mechanical routine where these helpless workers are condemned for ever to a hard way of life. The play can well be enranked with 'All My Sons' and 'Death of a Salesman' because business organisations play a vitally important role in all the three plays and these depict the alterations and change brought forth in their lives by the rapid industrial advancement. Though, 'A Memory of Two Mondays' exhibits the change occurred in the lives of a particular strata of society, i.e., the workers - the very ordinary and common man yet powerful tool in the process of production of industrial outputs.

The play is heavily punctuated with autobiographical nostalgia as it directly expresses the sordid reality and the experience which dawned on the author himself in thirties when he was forced to discontinue his studies and had to do manual labour in the auto-parts warehouse to earn for the accomplishment of his desire for further education. These indelible impressions imprinted on his mind during his stay in the ware

house have been transformed by into a larger issue that
painfully demonstrates the relationship of individual with
the social forces and the impact of 'machine - civilisation
on the mind and soul of the common people, who have no other
choice but to accept the dreadful monotony as their ultimate
destiny. The play very candidly denounces the 'willless and
hopeless' environment of capitalistic organisations and
emphatically deplores the absence of opportunities for the
betterment and progress of human beings in it. In this play
Miller has tacitly but very forcefully championed the cause
of the society's lower strata by veiling his crusade against
capitalism.

When the play, first appeared, along with 'A View
from the Bridge', on the same bill, in 1955, it failed to
earn favourable critical appraisal and esteem. Dramatic critics
briefly ignored it as "a plotless group of character studies" which suffered from "dramatic aimlessness." Miller has him-
self frankly confessed its brief dismissal:

"A Memory of Two Mondays was dismissed so thoroughly
that in one of the reviews, and one of the most
important, it was not even mentioned as having
been played." 3

A sympathetic and intimate insight into the play
reveals that the play deserved to be classified as Miller's
one the delicately finest plays for its subtle exposure and
accurate analysis of the impact of industrial advancement on
the destiny of the individuals. Miller skillfully dramatizes
their monotonous routine, alienation and suppression of will
and desire by bringing into light the capitalistic motivations

and priorities. Miller, in fact, misses no opportunity to arraign the vicious social system that has reduced the individual to a function of something like production and distribution. Alike "The Glass Menagerie", the characters of 'A Memory of Two Mondays' are caught in the most ordinary and awful of human situations: attempting to exist meaningfully in a world which allows them no sensible reason for either existence or meaning."¹ Leonard Moss has labeled it 'a social play'² in the strictest sense of the term because "the play is not, like those that had immediately preceded it, a psychological study with social connotations,"³ but the social implications have been dramatized straightway through the actions of the characters.

Miller has himself expressed his deep love for this play:

"Nothing in this book was written with greater love and for myself I love nothing printed here better than this play." ⁴

Miller's satisfaction for the play is understandable:

"He found it possible, without resorting to turgid generalisations, far-fetched myths, or abrupt changes in narrative direction, to define the predicament of characters who are unable to understand or combat oppressive influences in their society." ⁵

The credible atmosphere, a brooding sadness and believable characters impart the lasting charm and potential is the play and make it really a lovable piece of drama.

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². Moss, Leonard. 'Arthur Miller,' p.49.
³. Ibid.
⁵. Moss, Leonard. p.49.
Miller has intended to make this play a "pathetic comedy." The playwright has used for the first time humour in the play. The jubilant and pleasant aspect of the play emerges from the fulfillment of the hopes of 'Bert', who is able to break the bars of dreadful monotony and hence he is a manifestation of the affirmative in man and the pathetic sentiments are aroused from the "sealed - fate and despair of frustrated souls who remain in the ware-house for ever.

Interestingly, Miller expressed astonishment that 'A Memory of Two Mondays' was interpreted by many viewers as "something utterly sad and hopeless as a comment on life." Although he acknowledged the rancous despair of most of Bert's co-workers, the playwright nevertheless pointed his protagonist as a manifestation of the affirmative in man.

"After all, from this endless, timeless, will-less environment", he argued, "a boy emerges who will not accept its defeat or its mood as final, and literally takes himself off on a quest for a higher gratification.

Miller has explained the reasons for dominance of 'pathos' in the play in his essay "On Social Plays":

"When men live, as they do under any industrialized system, as integers who have no weight, no person, excepting as either customers, draftees, machine tenders, ideologists, or whatever, it is unlikely (and in my opinion impossible) that a dramatic picture of them can really overcome the public knowledge of their nature in real life. In such a society, be it communistic or capitalistic, man is not tragic; he is pathetic. The tragic figure must have certain innate powers which he uses to pass over the boundaries of the known social law-the accepted mores of his people- in order to test and discover necessity. Such a quest implies that the individual who has moved on to that course must be somehow recognized by the law, by the mores, by the powers that design -

as having the worth, the innate value, of a whole
people asking a basic question and demanding its
answer. We are so atomized socially that no
character in a play can conceivably stand as our
vanguard, as our heroic questioner."

In 'A Memory of Two Mondays' Miller is not so
much concerned to make an individual stand for the society as
to portray a small group of men who are representative of it.

He expounds his intentions behind the play:

"For a moment I was striving not to make people
forget they were in a theater, not to obliterate
an awareness of form, not to forge a pretense of
life, but to be abrupt, clear, and explicit in
setting forth fact as fact and art as art so that
the sea of theatrical sentiment, which is so easily
let in to drown all shape, meaning, and perspective,
might be held back and some hard outline of a human
dilemma be allowed to rise and stand. A Memory of
Two Mondays has a story but not a plot, because the
life it reflects appears to me to strip people of
alternatives and will beyond a close and tight
periphery in which they may exercise a meager choice."

When the play opens, on first Monday, we find the
pivotal character, Bert, an intelligent boy of eighteen and
an unerring autobiographical portrait of author himself, is
an employee of the automobile-parts warehouse. After doing
indifferently at school, like Miller, he is working hard to
earn enough money to pay for his studies at 'Barber College'.

At the opening of the play he is conversating with, Raymond,
the Warehouse manager, which reveals his hopes and intentions
clearly:

"Raymond, self-consciously; thus almost in mockery: I hear
you're going to go to college. Is that true?
Bert, embarrassed: Oh, I don't know, Mr. Ryan. They may not
even let me in, I got such bad marks in high school.
Raymond: You did?

Theater Essays of Arthur Miller, p.58.
2. Ibid., p.59.
Bert: Oh, yeah. I just played ball and fooled around, that's all. I think I wasn't listening, y'know?
Raymond: How much it going to cost you?
Bert: I guess about four, five hundred for the first year. So I'll be here a long time - if I ever do go. You ever go to college?"1

Bert, appears to be determined for realizing his hope and, therefore, he saves eleven or twelve dollars a week out of his fifteen dollar salary. He keeps on increasing his knowledge and consciousness of the outer world by reading newspapers and the literary books:
"Raymond - he has never paid much attention to Bert, is now curious, has time for it: How do you get time to read that paper?
Bert: Well, I've got an hour and ten minutes on the subway. I don't read it all, though. Just reading about Hitler.
Raymond: Who's that?
Bert: He took over the German government last week."2

Raymond: This the same book you been reading?
Bert: Well, it's pretty long, and I fall asleep right after supper.
Raymond, turning the book up: "War and Peace"?
Bert: Yeah, he's supposed to be a great writer.
Raymond: How long it take you to read a book like this?
Bert: Oh, probably about three, four months, I guess. It's hard on the subway, with all those Russian names.

2. Ibid., p.333.
Raymond, putting the book down: What do you get out of a book like that?

Bert: Well, it's - it's literature."

Raymond's conversation with Bert shows him to be fairly unconcerned about anything except making the man get-on with job and his disinterestedness and ignorance of things outside the warehouse is explicitly exposed. In fact, he has become so mechanical that he cannot think and spare no time for the things which broaden human understanding. He harbours a great deal of suspicion for the realization of Bert's hope for a better future.

From the beginning of the play, Bert is differentiated from the others by his youthful aspirations and his unassuming persistence in the seeing them realized Kenneth, his co-worker, points out these differences when he conjectures that Bert must have "some strong idea in his mind." 2

"That's the thing, y'know," he affirms in the poignant awareness of his own weakness -

"I often conceive them myself, but I'm all the time losin' them, though. It's the holdin' on - that's what does it. You can also see it in him, y'know? He's holdin' on to something." 3

Like Miller, he becomes attached to the people with whom he works, gradually coming to know them and sharing their troubles, joys, hopes and disillusionments.

In one respect Bert resembles other Miller protagonists: he is on quest for knowledge. Its literal manifestation is the college education for which he is working, but

1. Miller, Arthur. 'A Memory of Two Mondays', p.334.
2. Ibid., p.339.
3. Ibid., p.340.
his instruction has already begun in the warehouse to which he has become so ambivalently attached. Bert's the story of a boy's initiation into maturity, the bumpy voyage from the deceptive surety of innocence to the doubt and anguish bred of experience.

In another respect, Bert is markedly dissimilar to the usual Miller hero. The knowledge he gains is not so much an understanding of himself as it is the most tentative kind of intuition into the lives of the people with whom he has spent the past year. It is entirely fitting that at the end of the play Bert should come to no conclusions or resolution about life, other than the realization that it is indeed a mystery. He leaves appropriately bewildered, and yet in his confusion he has quietly but emphatically taken the first important step in his education.

On the morning of the second Monday, on the occasion of his departure, he expects some kind of significant moment, a sign perhaps his presence has meant something to his friends, but lost in their personal problems and deadening morass of routine, they barely notice him.

"Bert: Agnes?
Agnes, seeing the coat on, the book in his hand: Oh, you're leaving, Bert!
Bert: Yeah.
Agnes: Well. You're leaving
Bert, expectantly: Yeah.

Patricia enters.
Patricia: Agnes? Your switchboard's ringing.
Jerry enters with goods.
Agnes : Okay! Patricia goes out. Well, good luck. I hope you pass everything.
Bert : Thanks, Aggie. She walks across and out, wiping a hair across her forehead. Willy enters with goods as Jerry goes out. Jim enters with goods."

"Bert : Well, so long, Tommy.
Tom, turning : Oh, you goin', heh?
Bert : Yeah, I'm leavin' right now.
Tom : Well, keep up the will power, y'know. That's what does it.
Bert : Yeah. I--uh--I wanted to---

Raymond enters.

Raymond : Oh! 'By, Bert.
Bert : So long, Raymond, I - Raymond is already on his way, and he is gone. Jim enters with goods. Bert goes over to Kenneth and touches his back. Kenneth turns to him. Jim goes out as Willy enters with goods - Jerry too, and this work goes on without halt.¹

None of his work-mates have time to spare to say a few words of farewell to their departing colleague. His departure appears them to be a rarity and they don't want to acknowledge it by 'bidding him adieu'. They prefer to be engrossed in the deadening load of routine and remain unconcerned with Bert's departure and his plans for future. Miller has explicitly depicted the dampening and chilling affect of monotonous existence on them.

¹. Miller, Arthur. 'A Memory of Two Mondays', p.174.
At the end, Bert walks, slowly, almost unwillingly to the door, while around him there is constant and seemingly unending activity. Willy snatches an order slip from the book; Kenneth wraps a package; Jerry enters, picks up a parcel, and leaves; Jim arrives, drops some goods on the table, and exits; Lany comes in with a container of coffee and checks through some orders, Patricia enters and ambles past Bert to get some fresh air window; and Tom bumbles through a pile of goods on the table, checking a package against the order slip in his hand.

"Arrivals. Departures. Perpetual motion. And yet the overwhelming stasis as time and circumstance combine to make a mockery of all this effort. Things are sent out, things are received - but nothing is really accomplished, and as the activity continues, time slips away, slowly and imperceptibly narrowing the circumferences of the lives that comprise the existence of that large, pallid room. Only the boy, edging hesitantly and disappointedly towards the door makes a movement that is not circular and self-defeating."

The two Mondays which the young man remembers are deceptively similar. The same characters are at the same jobs; their conversations are dotted with the same bits and pieces of repetitious dialogue; some of their jokes and most of their complaints are unchanged; even their wariness of the employer who comes to check on them each of these Mondays has not abated. Nevertheless, changes have taken place, and in two of the relationships they are readily recognizable.

The relationship between Kenneth and Tom Kelley almost completely reverses itself between the two Mondays. Kenneth the sensitive, poetic young Irishman of first scene

has begun to deteriorate in the second. He becomes intensely aware of "a good deal of monotony connected with life" and of his "exhaustion". He is still sensitive, compassionate, and appealing; but he is now slipping into alcoholism. His addiction in fact, extinguishes all his hopes for better future -

Bert: You made up your mind for Civil Service?

Kenneth: Well you've got to keep movin', and - I'll move there, I guess. I done a shockin' thing last night, Bert; I knocked over a bar.

Bert: Knocked it over?

Kenneth: It's disgraceful, what I done. I'm standin' there, havin' a decent conversation, that's all, and before I know it I start rockin' the dammed thing, and it toppled over and broke every glass in the place, and the beer spoutin' out of the pipes all over the floor. They took all me money; I'll be six weeks payin' them back. I'm for the Civil Service, I think; I'll get back to regular there, I think.

Bert: Well - good luck, Kenny. Blushing: I hope you'll remember the poems again.

Kenneth, as though they were unimportant: No, they're gone.

His constant complaint that he can no longer remember the snatches of poetry a painful indication of his slow but remorseless descent.

On the other hand, Tom Kelly has risen. The seemingly hopeless drunk of the first scene, teetering on the brink of expulsion from his job, has by some incredible

1. Miller, Arthur. 'A Memory of Two Mondays', p.375.
exertion of will pulled himself together and become a respectable teetotaler. There is no precise correlation between the changes in the two men. They are not particularly close friends and there is no indication that they have influenced each other. Nonetheless, emerging out of their reversals is the element that defines each of them and most of their co-workers: a sense of loss.

Kenneth's charm and spontaneity have all but dissolved in a drunken torpor, and Tom, although he has apparently straightened himself out, has become somewhat unbearable, puffed up with an unattractive self-righteousness that contrasts ironically with the inebriate affability of his former self. Larry cuts to the heart of the change when he reminds Tom that he liked him better as an alcoholic.

"I mean it," he asserts. "Before we only had to pick you up all the time; now you got opinions about everything."

Larry is also a study in loss, and his relationship with Patricia, the girl who works in the outer office, again emphasizes this motif and mood. On the first Monday Larry has just rebelled against his claustrophobic existence by buying a car he cannot afford. He has done so as an act of self-assertion over the protests of his wife, and his brother and sister who are both in debt to him but who never hesitate to remind him of his responsibilities. His casual invitation to Patricia to go driving is a further attempt to reassert his independence, and this new feeling of assurance reaches a peak when Larry rises majestically to
the greatest challenge existence in the warehouse has to offer finding a replacement for an obsolete truck part.

Locating the piece of machinery becomes a mock-heroic quest and as Larry tells Bert how to find it, the rest of the workers group around him in open mouthed wonder and respect. For a brief moment, man has chosen to do battle with the mechanized, deterministic jungle around him, to assert his will and conquer the forces that have victimized him.

Get the key to the third floor from Miss Molloy. Go up there, and when you open the door you'll see those Model-T mufflers stacked up. Well, go past the mufflers and you'll see a lot of bins going up to the ceiling. They're full of Marmon valves and ignition stuff. Go past them and you'll come to a little corridor, see? At the end of the corridor is a pile of crates - I think there's some Maxwell differentials in there. Climb over the crates, but don't keep goin', see. Stand on top of the crates and turn right. Then bend down, and there's a bin—No, I tell you, get off the crates, and you can reach behind them, but to the right, and reach into that bin. There's a lot of Locomobile headnuts in there, but way back- you gotta stick your hand way in, see, and you'll find one of these.

It is Larry's victory over necessity, and the moment is shiningly his.

On the second Monday he is confronted only with defeat. The car has been sold, an affair with Patricia is sputtering to a dismal conclusion, and he is once more between the pincers.

Larry's defeat is also Patricia's. The bright, brassy girl of the first Monday has hardened; the brass has begun to tarnish. There will be more Larrys for her,

1. Miller, Arthur. 'A Memory of Two Mondays', p.351.
but without his sincerity. Like Kenneth and Tom, Patricia and Larry have lost some charm, some warmth, and some belief.

The other characters in the play do not change perceptibly. They act on the second Monday as they did on the first. Raymond, the manager, dourly attempts to keep the operation running smoothly. Gus lecherously teases Patricia; Agnes continues her spinsterly giggles and blushes; Jerry and Willy still display their crude efforts at sophistication; Frank the truck driver still arranges his route so he can stop over with various girl friends strategically interspersed throughout the five boroughs of New York; and Jim loyally and quietly looks after his friend Gus.

But even for those to whom the second Monday is a carbon copy of the first, some measure of defeat is evident. Like a carbon, the second day lacks a freshness and spontaneity, a vitality which marks Bert's first recollections. And although the workers have not undergone marked alterations, they have still experienced loss. They have all grown older, wearier, and more disillusioned. We see them finally by winter light. 

Miller's has termed 'A Memory of Two Mondays' a "pathetic comedy." Certainly the strongest effect of the play is the genuine sympathy it evokes for all those who remain behind after Bert's departure. But the pathos of the drama never degenerates into sentimentality. One of

the compelling reasons we feel compassion for these people a because they do not ask for it; they do not feel sorry for themselves. Loudly and actively they affirm their existences in that musty community, laughing, crying, even sporadically raging against their woefully circumscribed destinies. And nowhere is this phenomenon more graphically personified than in the character and situation of Gus, the coarse, indomitable old lecher whose vigor and defiance attain almost heroic dimensions.

Gus is actually the man hit hardest by adversity. In the first scene, while he is carousing away a drunken weekend with his friend Jim, his ailing wife dies. In the second scene, although he still makes obscene remarks, chases the girls, and growls defiance at his employer, he is a changed man, racked by the guilt he feels for his wife's death. But although Gus is finally destroyed, he goes down riotously and uncompromisingly on a monumental spree of drunken self-assertion.

He begins by intending to visit his wife's grave, but he never gets there. Instead he buys two fenders to put on an old wreck of a Ford he has picked up somewhere, and he spends the whole weekend lugging them around, until he finally brings them to the warehouse. Then he lashes out in a final rebellion against the accumulated monotony of his life, and stalks out. Drawing all his money out of the bank, he goes on one last great bender, purchasing new clothes, picking up some girls, hiring three taxis (one for himself, one for Jim, and the other to bring up the rear in case of emergency), and making a run-sodden pilgrimage to every bar
he can find. He finally dies in his taxi; amid his girls, in a rather bizarre approximation of Oriental splendor.

However, for all his vitality, bravado, and rebelliousness, Gus is crushed by the tonnage of twenty-two years in the warehouse. His valedictory speech, in which he traces those years in the cars he has serviced, beautifully illuminates his character and the themes of the play. Referring to his boss, he calls out to Bert and the others:

When Mr Eagle was in high school I was already here. When there was Winston Six I was here. When was Minerva car I was here. When was Stanley Steamer I was here, and Stearns Knight, and Marmon was good car, I was here all them times. I was here first day Raymond come; he was young boy; work hard be manager. When Agnes still think she was gonna get married I was here. When was Locomobile, and Model K Ford and Model N Ford - all them different Fords, and Franklin was good car, Jordan car, Reo car, Pierce Arrow, Cleveland car - all them was good cars. All them times I was here. I was here first day Raymond come; he was young boy; work hard be manager. When Agnes still think she was gonna get married I was here. When was Locomobile, and Model K Ford and Model N Ford - all them different Fords, and Franklin was good car, Jordan car, Reo car, Pierce Arrow, Cleveland car - all them was good cars. All them times I was here. I was here first day Raymond come; he was young boy; work hard be manager. When Agnes still think she was gonna get married I was here. When was Locomobile, and Model K Ford and Model N Ford - all them different Fords, and Franklin was good car, Jordan car, Reo car, Pierce Arrow, Cleveland car - all them was good cars. All them times I was here.

"I know," Bert says sympathetically; and Gus replies, "You don't know nothing."

To a great extent he is right. Bert cannot fully comprehend the terrible obsolescence the older man has described. He does not even know why he should be the one fortunate enough to escape Gus's grim inventory.

'A Memory of Two Mondays' does not fit into any plan that nearly traces the thematic development of Arthur Miller. An almost flawlessly structured play, it shows the dramatist in complete control of his form, but basically departing from the major themes and conflicts

that had interested him in the past and would again preoccupy him in future endeavors. The play does not deal with ethical problems; it contains no strong moral conflicts nor does it present the need for self-recognition, free choice, or commitment. It is not about family strife; and it does not pattern itself after a court of inquiry or a trial. It does not advocate, condemn, polemicize, or even judge. 1

This play is a considerable achievement. Tragicomedy requires that the stories of a number of people be told. It requires that not merely one mood, but various conflicting ones be evoked. It usually requires irony and it often uses lyricism and song. These qualities are all present in Miller's play, and it is remarkable that he was able to pack so much in so effectively. In a way it is like trying to pack The Plough and the Stars into one act and succeeding. This is a moving, technically adroit, and beautiful job, one of the rare instances of a one-act tragicomedy. 2

1. Nelson, Benjamin. 'Portrait of a Playwright', p.244.