

THE CRITICAL FORTUNES OF ARTHUR MILLER'S

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

A Thesis

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Angela M. Metzger

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents Bob and Patti, my wonderful siblings Adelaide, Chelsea, Jake, and Alexis, and my brother and friend Thaddeus and his family. Without their love, support, and encouragement I never would have achieved my love of learning and dream of teaching.

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ABSTRACT

THE CRITICAL FORTUNES OF ARTHUR MILLER'S

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This thesis undertakes the task of exploring Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* through various venues and critical interpretations. In particular, it will focus on the relevance and endeavors of Miller's writing in its placement of 20th century American drama. Miller's play serves as a pivotal work balancing on the cusp of the modernist and post-modernist era, embodying man's search for meaning in the American culture and society around him.

The first chapter will summarize key points, give a literature review, and address methodological concerns of this thesis. Opening with Stanley Kauffmann's definition of "tragedy," this serves as a springboard for the tragic philosophical contentions present in 20th century drama. This chapter lays the foundation of Miller's

play as a post-modern epic which seeks to explore man's perilous situation in the progression of the modern age.

The second chapter will then explore elements of tragedy by analyzing an amalgamation of critical sources which elaborate and examine modern tragedy found in both Classical theatre and that of the present day. To quote Miguel de Unamuno, "To cure the plague is not enough, it must also be lamented with bitter tears. Yes, we must learn to weep!" (21). The persistence of memory with the expansion of consciousness means that human beings must take time to "learn" again how to feel and register losses. This is Miller's purpose in modern American tragedy, to make his audience experience pathos, the ability to *feel* again. Through a modern critical guise this chapter will look at the critical interpretation of Miller's work and motives in writing *Death of a Salesman*, as a work that fuses classical dramatic tensions with modern themes crucial to our present age.

The third chapter will look at the role of the "American dream" and its connection to the myth of the Eden and creation. The garden-or wilderness-was once a paradise, a symbol of wealth that embodies man's creative possibility. But like Adam, Miller's characters are fallen creatures in a fallen world. Their search for the garden is as futile as Willy Loman's quest for wealth and riches in a world that does not recognize who he is. Likewise the dream of a better life, the "American dream," then becomes a myth that cannot be achieved on Miller's stage. Chapter III will examine the biblical motif of the garden and the cultivation of the American Dream, both its hopes and

failures in the Loman family. This includes an examination of the “American man,” his placement on the stage both literal and figuratively. It will delve into Miller’s idea of the tragic man as the common man, not king or prince, but the everyday American whose deeds are worthy of our attention.

The fourth chapter will then be a juxtaposition of parallel passages from Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and O’Neill’s play *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. The comparative links between these two plays is not merely chronological, but focuses on two American families seemingly at the edge of ruin. Each family has the central figures of mother, father, and their two sons. Both plays examine the American family; flawed, broken, and hopelessly unable to rise above their circumstances; be it emotional, social, financial, or psychological. Each plays further suggest that the family is a commentary on the evolution of modern American society, strained between ideals of love and blind forces of oppressive economic determinism.

This will be followed by the Chapter V, the Conclusion, thus completing the tragic work Arthur Miller has wrought with his play *Death of a Salesman*, demonstrating both the social and interior complexities of modern man and American drama.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sixty years ago this past April, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* opened in New York. The press notices registered positive reactions to its concentrated power, its bold use of intermixed time-frames, its two-tiered set and imaginative lighting, and its important themes. Not infrequently, terms like "tragedy" and "tragic" surfaced. No viewer could have doubted its emotional seriousness; as Stanley Kauffmann noted, "the play bristles with spears of pathos that no critical shield can deflect" (103). Some voices even suggested that this play would open a new direction for the evolution of American drama.

Hindsight reveals curiously diverse consequences of the play. It certainly succeeded in becoming a staple of high-school English classrooms. Its dialogue pushes into the foreground overt assertions of multiple "important" themes; its subject-matter centers on no powerfully controversial attitudes; any targeted political positions or implications remain ambiguous; its language is free of blatant obscenities; and it continues to work very effectively on the stage, even when high-school students have difficulty casting the role of Willy Loman. On the other hand, American drama did not flourish in new directions or even seem to acknowledge Miller's work; and today American drama seems to be nearly moribund.

My thesis will explore why the critical fortunes of the play have fallen so far by means of three prisms. The second chapter will examine the continuing disagreements among academic critics concerning whether, and by what criteria, the play is a tragedy. I will attempt to arrange the disagreements into a grid whereby they might be clarified comparatively. Such a comparison, nonetheless, will only substantiate a lack of clear tragic understanding on Miller's part; he had many varied notions of tragedy in mind, but he never managed to blend them together into a single overall vision. The third chapter will disentangle the multiple, cross-hatched thematics ceaselessly punctuating the play's dialogue and action; my aim is to determine the degree to which lack of clarity comes from critical analyses or from Miller. I believe that I have balanced a respect for Miller's diverse themes with a fair criticism of the contradictions between them that he has left unresolved. The fourth chapter will employ a method of very close attention to language and staging, selecting key moments in the play for scrutiny. For this purpose, I have chosen to use a critical yardstick for comparative evaluation, placing into parallel passages from Miller and O'Neill, whose greatest play came so shortly after Miller's.

To highlight what makes *Death of a Salesman* seem weaker with the passing decades, I contrast its techniques and construction with those of its most powerful contemporary, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The links between these two plays are not merely chronological. Both focus intensively on an American family seemingly at the edge of ruin; each family centers almost exclusively on the mother, father, and their two sons, living together though all the boys are well past college age. Both plays further suggest that their family comments deeply on the

evolution of modern American society, strained between ideals of love and blind forces of oppressive economic determinism. What makes these two plays seem, today, so radically different from each other? My answers will establish the grounds for my concluding attempt to situate *Death of a Salesman* within an adjusted critical framework.

Academic approaches to modern drama have been relatively unaffected, even neglected, by the upsurge over the past 30 years of “critical theory.”

The reason for this relative neglect is easy to discern. Poems and prose works exist as words on a page that invite continual re-examination by critical theories which in common challenge the notion that words can be fixed into meaning by representational reference. The “garden” in a poem or story, we have learned, need not relate to a garden in the life-world of objective reality; it can be considered indefinitely as a role within a network of other words that together create their own reality. The “garden” in *Death of a Salesman*, however, always at least refers to a concrete representation in a performance of that play—to the interaction of sets, lighting, props, and actual stage actions by actual people uttering the words in contexts fulfilled by each performance. The play-text is merely one component in any play; the other principal component is its history of performances, each one of which concretizes an interpretation that must be seen and not merely imagined. Drama is the ritual enactment of words. Its words are staging directions activating actual events and scenes set before an audience. A critic must therefore consider the play-text only as it is the initial phase in a process that actualizes itself in a performance: as a reality already interpreted. There simply is no fun to be discovered by a critic in interpreting the play-text on the grounds that it can sponsor an

indefinite number of readings. Theater people have known and worked with that knowledge from the very beginnings of drama in pre-literate times. It's old-hat to them, and only part of the story, anyway. The strongest plays continue to be performed precisely because they acknowledge only too well the indeterminateness of meaning in every play-text.

Hence dramatic criticism labors still with issues of generic distinctions, whereby the nature of "tragedy" remains a compelling subject for continued analysis. Drama critics also must confront the reality that a play is already, from the outset, designed for collaborative creation: text, actors, director, costumers, set designers, lighting technicians, and sound effects professionals. This ensemble creates a world on the stage that in turn affects the actions taking place there, with the added dimension of an ongoing interplay with each new audience. A play actually makes things happen in the world. No wonder such supreme novelists of the interior life like Henry James could never happily surrender a desire to create successful dramas. It would be like creating a new world made flesh, incarnate as ongoing action. The playwright has always accepted a metaphysics of process--a metaphysics well-equipped to deter any attacks from alternative metaphysical assumptions. Every play, on its own, must needs deconstruct its previous incarnation.

CHAPTER II

THE REIGN OF TRAGEDY ON READINGS OF

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

The focus most persistent in Miller criticism concerns the issue of genre and its constituents: to what degree is *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy? Most critics use their answer to this question as the controlling assumption for their detailed interpretations. Arthur Miller himself propounded his ideas on tragedy in an essay published soon after the 1949 opening of his play. He recognized at once the heart of the critical conundrum: that “tragedy” had escaped its Classical generic determination in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and had expanded into the role of an intellectual concept of astonishing amplitude.

The critique of Aristotle’s formalistic definition of tragedy arguably began when Christian thinkers posited a God of both infinite forgiveness and the promise of eternal being in the Kingdom of Heaven. In Christian thought, all human beings are equally fallen from the get-go; God the Father is willing to forgive all sins; and Heaven awaits thereafter. Being alive in this world, then, seems a mere trifle of recurrent suffering. Perhaps strains of skepticism and stoicism mediate Christian consolation during the Renaissance. In any case, the great verse tragedies of the period--by

Shakespeare, Racine, and Calderon--owe more to Latin theorists like Donatus than to any immediate access to Aristotle. Nonetheless, the transference and generalization of the concept of "tragedy" from drama into a world-view dates from the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, when Hegel began his systematic subversion of Enlightenment reason. In his voluminous writings on tragedy, Hegel saw "the tragic" as a phase in the isomorphic exfoliation of history and of individual consciousness, a phase he often termed unhappy consciousness. Subsequent German thinkers worked with Hegel's generalization of tragedy into a life-form, keeping it just as highly abstract. The culmination came in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Nietzsche, whose pervasive influence on modern and so-called post-modern" thought remains undisputed, claimed that tragedy arose as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist (38). He identified the mythic figure of Dionysus as the incarnation of the tragic: "The tradition is undisputed that Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysus and that for a long time the only stage hero was Dionysus himself" (73). The Dionysian, in man, is "the eternal and original artistic power that first calls the whole world of phenomena into existence. . . .a region in whose joyous chords dissonance as well as the terrible image of the world fade away charmingly" (143). In Nietzsche's view, the Dionysian force introduced and reveled in that plenitude of dissonances that threatened all intellectualized systems, all schemes of order, including human individuation. The tragic force emerges from the collision of joyful chaos with the equally human need to make sense out of life. As Western societies progressively bureaucratized, classified, and regimented reality, the

Dionysian life-force suffered. In short, tragedy is a battle of creative energy against the Enlightenment world of practical reason. This thinking explains phenomena like alienation, anomie, “world-nausea,” and a despair that is “a sickness unto death.” The cultural context for Nietzsche’s work was the collapse of faith in revealed religion, leaving human beings alone and unsponsored in facing loss and death.

The great Spanish writer, Miguel de Unamuno, elaborated Nietzschean and Hegelian notions of the tragic into a narrative whereby the human heart and natural impulses were forever pitted in conflict with the various guises of “social structure” in his hugely influential *Tragic Sense of Life* (1913). Unamuno never refers to tragedy as a literary genre, but rather as a complex of ideas, attitudes, and feelings. He builds his argument from a deep sensitivity to the growing estrangement between human beings and God. He does not argue against this estrangement, but rather conceives of it poetically, as a change in the currents of human affairs, and therefore as a change that must be understood and for a time accommodated.

Human reason, through science and technology, has manifested its power, and power, once experienced, becomes an addiction for human reason. Like Hegel, Unamuno acknowledges these changing currents as the development of consciousness; but neither sees it as the final stop of spirit or life-force, which one day will evolve beyond consciousness. Unamuno observes that consciousness depends on memory, and memory will not stay in place as a servant to reason. Memory brings forth what has been lost equally as much as what might be possible. As Unamuno notes, “To cure the plague is not enough, it must also be lamented with bitter tears. Yes, we must learn to weep!”

(21). The persistence of memory with the expansion of consciousness means that human beings will have to take time to “learn” again how to feel and register losses. What he calls “the tragic sense of life” entails that we persistently recognize that “no one has ever proved that man must necessarily be joyful by nature” (22). Instead, Unamuno offers a secularized vision of the human soul: “man, because he is man, because he possesses consciousness, is already, in comparison to the jackass or the crab, a sick animal. Consciousness is a disease” (22). Only toward the end of his argument does Unamuno, in addressing the practical problem (282), offer hints about how human beings might be able to re-direct consciousness: “Instead of renouncing the world in order to dominate it . . . what we should do is dominate the world in order to be able to renounce it” (314). By world, he does not mean the natural world or the world of the senses; he, like Nietzsche, means the oppressively modernized or Enlightened world of bureaucracies, dominating central governments, and their pressure to obey and conform. Such a new revolution, whereby human beings might renounce this rationalized Enlightenment world, would be the positive contribution of the tragic sense of life, where the value of what has been lost can be redeemed secularly in the re-birth of a new and better world. As Wallace Stevens writes in “Sunday Morning”: “Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,/Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams/And our desires” (69).

Another contemporary of Unamuno and Stevens, Alfred North Whitehead, writes tersely in *Adventures of Ideas* (1933) what could be a gloss on Unamuno’s hope;

and his comments can also be taken as a compelling answer to the ancient question of why audiences want and need to see tragic drama:

As soon as high consciousness is reached, the enjoyment of existence is entwined with pain, frustration, loss, tragedy. Amid the Peace is then the intuition of permanence. It keeps vivid the sensitiveness to the tragedy; and it sees the tragedy as a living agent persuading the world to aim at fineness beyond the faded level of surrounding fact. Each tragedy is the disclosure of an ideal--What might have been, and was not: What can be. The tragedy was not in vain. This survival value power in motive force, by reason of appeal to reserves of Beauty, marks the difference between the tragic evil and the gross evil. (369)

When Whitehead writes that tragedy might become “a living agent persuading the world to aim at fineness beyond the faded level of surrounding fact” (369), he is in fact explaining what Unamuno means in writing urgently that human beings again must “learn” to weep.

On another intellectual front, Classical scholars have also engaged over the past forty years in a significant re-reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, culminating in the enormously influential article by E.R. Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*” (1966). He demonstrates how Aristotle did not locate the source of tragedy in a character “flaw,” considered in any moral or psychological sense. Dodds notes that Aristotle, in *Poetics 13*, uses the word “hamartia” (transliterated from the Classical Greek) to designate the cause for a good man’s falling victim to some overwhelming misfortune. Victorian translators and critics, however, considered only the first of the term’s two senses: either a false moral judgment or a purely intellectual error. The Victorian moralizing temperament led to an exclusive sense of the first meaning, perpetuating it in the standard translations of the *Poetics* often still in use. By citing every one of

Aristotle's other uses of "hamartia" throughout his works (especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*), Dodds convincingly shows that Aristotle always employed the term only "to mean an offense committed in ignorance of some material fact and therefore free from . . . wickedness" (19-20). Dodds then delivers a summary critique of the bad readings wrought by the misconception of "hamartia"; and his assertions bear directly on my following scrutiny of the disagreements among Miller's commentators concerning "tragedy" and "the tragic":

The theory that the tragic hero must have a grave moral flaw, and its mistaken ascription to Aristotle, has had a long and disastrous history. It was gratifying to Victorian critics, since it appeared to fit certain plays of Shakespeare. But it goes back much further, to the seventeenth-century French critic Dacier, who influenced the practice of the French classical dramatists, especially Corneille, and was himself influenced by the still older nonsense about 'poetic justice'--the notion that the poet has a moral duty to represent the world as a place where the good are always rewarded and the bad are always punished. I need not say this puerile idea is completely foreign to Aristotle and to the practices of the Greek dramatists. (20)

In this light, Aristotle, like Nietzsche, sees tragedy as emerging from human nature--specifically from our lack of omniscience, from our common fate of ignorance in the face of crucial facts. Reality always exceeds our attempts to grasp or measure it. It pummels us with events and outcomes no one possibly could have foreseen, and might best be identified with common notions of fate or necessity lying beyond our comprehension. In this manner, every human being will suffer from unforeseeable consequences that might bring loss and death. Willy Loman thereby becomes potentially an everyman figure.

Such broadening of the sense of tragedy clearly coincided with two centuries that witnessed a progressive loss of religious faith; and it also coincided with the formidable restructuring of society, whereby human individuality remains every day threatened by the dominant forces constructed into the human world: gigantic monopolies; pervasive materialism; enormous central governments; and a resulting network of control, conditioning, and repression. Such backgrounds go some distance in explaining and justifying my approach in this chapter.

How can Miller's *Death of a Salesman* be called a tragedy and yet be interpreted in so many different fashions? The answer is now clear: the generalized expansion of what "tragedy" means enfeebles its decisiveness as a useful critical tool. I will begin with Miller's own notion of the tragic, and then survey representative diverse commentaries in which the term "tragedy" has sponsored the current critical disagreements.

Miller's Writings on Tragedy

Arthur Miller wrote, "In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us . . . for one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy or tragedy above us" (3). These words characterize Miller's approach in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," where he spells out his reasons for writing *Death of a Salesman* as what he considers a traditional tragedy-- although his model seems to be a loose amalgam of Greek and Renaissance antecedents. *The New York Times* published this article only weeks after *Death of a Salesman* opened.

The tremendous critical and popular success of the play must have lacked some recognition of his intentions for Miller to have rushed this article into print. Miller declares himself concerned to imbue his characters with experiences of struggles, griefs, losses, along with small acts of heroism. His protagonist, Willy Loman (low man), carries the weight of being a representative “American” man, a figure who toils and pushes onward, unrecognized by the world; in presenting such a figure, Miller hoped to invoke the fears and the empathy of his audience--perhaps, in the sense of Unamuno and Whitehead, to use Willy’s tragic suicide as a “living agent” to elicit the tears which might move people to demand a better world by renouncing the world Willy falls victim to. Certainly Miller combined the naturalism of Ibsen with the symbolic scope of Classical theater. His play, together with those of O’Neill and Wilder, mark a decisive break from the practices and themes of nineteenth-century theatrical melodramas-which demanded achievement of a happy ending. Miller insists he wants his audience to experience the pain of a life passing without recognition or acknowledgement. This experience might prompt viewers to question their own purposes and values

Miller announces his focus on common Americans struggling for but failing to grasp a communal sense of success. Miller’s work as a whole testifies to his concentrated attention on the instabilities and flaws of ordinary Americans as they responded to the de-provincialized urban world, a world increasingly sick of itself. The determining social environment appears in Miller’s works as a constant mockery of personal attempts to ground and sustain individual identity. The defeat of the communal ideas of Populism in the 1890s left the American social environment to the control of the

impersonal forces of mechanization and standardization.

Miller grew up during the Depression in a Jewish-American section of New York, full of ideals concerning social justice and democratic values. No wonder he was so able to tap into the reductive, ordained cultural identities of his male protagonists: corruptible in the face of rigid rules, failure-prone in the light of steadily growing expectations, locked into labor unnoticed by other people, who were all required to be preoccupied by the same struggles. In his essay, he defines the common American man whose story, Miller believes, must be told:

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense of kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis on classical formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. (3)

This assertion tacitly follows the broadening generalization of “tragedy” outlined at the outset of this chapter. Miller goes on to stress two essential criteria concerning his writing of *Death of a Salesman*: first, he wants to place his characters in a contemporary American setting, yet confront the identical tragic situation faced by kings in tragedies of the Classical and Renaissance stage; and second, the Classical and Renaissance tragedies focus on the same crushing weight felt by his middle-class American family. Miller’s focus on individuals, however, shifts his gaze from the controlling operations of impersonal forces. He thereby sidesteps the opportunity to become politically radical. His imagination is rich with the compassion of a Sophocles, but it falls short of the vision of Socrates, where dialogue can transform a world.

Miller’s notion of the common man parallels that of Unamuno. Willy can

wholly embody a tragic sense of life. Anonymity and loneliness are common features of all social stations in the modern world. What Willy needs, and what Miller doesn't seem to notice, is to learn to weep. The issue is not one of recommending self-pity; rather, as Willy's wife, Linda, constantly asserts, we must grieve for the past, acknowledge its value in our grieving, and then put it away.

Steinberg's Theory of Modern Tragedy

M. W. Steinberg, in his "Arthur Miller and the Idea of Tragedy," tries to situate Miller's play and a modern role for tragedy within the perspective of F. L. Lucas: "Serious drama is a serious representation by speech and action of some phrase of human life. [. . .] If there is an unhappy ending, we may call it tragedy; but if the play is a serious attempt to represent life it makes no great difference whether or not good fortune intervenes in the last scene" (81). Steinberg points out that Lucas establishes the serious or unhappy ending in tragedy as a representation of "real life." In the 20th century the stage was no longer a realm of melodrama or Classical theater, of an earlier "glorious" time before our own. Instead, Steinberg argues that tragedy intends to exhibit or reflect the "realism" of the world through the vehicle of stage action. He also is very interested in Miller's essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," claiming that what Miller constructs in *Death of a Salesman* is a collision of the individual and society: "Tragedy, says Miller, must question everything; from the total questioning we learn" (84). Calling on an analogy to the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Steinberg argues that Miller writes in a "post-Ibsen" fashion, creating characters that could easily walk off the stage and onto the streets.

This focus on an individual's personal identity and how it operates in the larger realm of society requires an anatomy of the common man: "He cautions us not to exclude the personal factor, for the hero must not be flawless [. . .] Tragedy need not preach revolution . . . since its theme is man's need to wholly realize himself" (84). Miller, like Ibsen, speaks of the tragic Modern hero, one shaped by the rigid demands of the world around him. Nora or Torvald from *A Doll's House* represent people whom you might run into on the street, realistic representations of the world beyond the stage. He also points out that by putting the common man in a realistic setting, Miller also examines the social realm by displaying the common man's plight: The concern with the social problem, the social injustice and its effect on the lives of the characters, is found in Miller's plays too. The economic basis of social mischief is as obvious in *All My Sons* as in Shaw's *Widowers' House* or Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*; in *Death of a Salesman* the common man is crushed by forces outside of himself and by illusions, false ideas spawned by those forces . . . (82)

Exterior forces play a key role in Miller's modernist work, opening wide the box of unjust social forces of the world. In *Death of a Salesman*, Loman recurs to a state of continual denial, desperately trying to believe his own brand of reality versus the blatant fact that, in this America, he will remain a little man made for little things. The social forces, as Steinberg conceives them, are means by which 20th-century dramatists, including Miller, can analyze the actions of the hero. Steinberg is unwilling to say that society carries the blame for the hero's downfall; instead he goes on to argue that tragedy

in a modern context seeks to exemplify the individual's "interior tragic qualities" (83).

These internal qualities, claims Steinberg, are a dynamic constituent of the individual character, evoking the deeper response in the audience. The audience sees the plight of the individual on stage and is filled with a sense of empathy. We understand and identify with Willy Loman, some of whose qualities every human being possesses.

Willy's kingdom is his dilapidated house and his rundown neighborhood, with its broken fences and barren lawns.

Steinberg also addresses Miller's *second* point about the importance of classical tragic archetypes, and the need for bringing them into a modern context: "As the twentieth century approached, various sources were making for realism in drama with its emphasis on people and situations drawn from ordinary life" (81). Steinberg claims that the 20th century is the time when the common man could be noticed, exalted, and compared to the characters and tragic figures of earlier epochs. He also maintains that because Miller accepts this sense of realism, the audience is taken from the fabricated realm of the stage into their everyday lives. He elaborates: ". . . where such a sense of exultation or reconciliation existed in the traditional tragedy, it could be achieved only by focusing on the hero and ignoring the world" (83). According to Steinberg, then, the role of classical theatre from Greek antiquity to Shakespeare's stage was to achieve a relentless focus on the hero. But he argues that in the 20th Century the world of the mundane material life is central. As long as the real, the tangible, the ordinary is represented on the stage, then the audience can have a pathetic response to the material. This does not mean "pathetic" in its 21st-century form, as a negativism. "Pathetic," as

derived from the Greek word “pathos,” simply designates feeling or emotion. In an Aristotelian sense, drama should invoke both “panic” and “empathy” in one’s audience. I am using here Walter Kaufmann’s convincing re-translation of Aristotle’s two terms “phobos” and “eleos. The conventional translation of “fear” and “pity” fail to convey Aristotle’s systematic use of the words; they are better conveyed by stronger contemporary terms like “panic” and “sympathy” (43-49). It is not enough for an audience to *see* what transpires on the stage--the art itself. The drama of the play must affect them in such a way they *feel* with the characters and events. Steinberg points out that for centuries the dramatic arts have illustrated this fact. We, the audience, feel with Oedipus as he woefully discovers the trespass of his actions in killing his father, marrying his mother, and causing the plague to rain down on Thebes. We empathize with King Lear as his failing intellectual powers press him into banishing Cordelia--his only good and faithful child--while his two evil daughters, Goneril and Regan, vie for his power, his legacy, and his kingdom. Panic and empathy arise from the fact that even such heroic characters can be brought into utter despair.

Steinberg believes that in Classical tragedy, many plays cushion the effects of the real world: “The superb poetry at the end of *Hamlet* and *Lear*, which diverts us and cushions the shock of the horrors revealed, does not really change the fact that this is a world in which Hamlet is treacherously poisoned and Cordelia is found hanged” (83). Actions themselves can be strongly felt by the viewer; we feel the string of loss and pain, yet are distanced from it because of the fictionalized setting. But Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* takes place in a familiar urban setting, and does not permit the audience to

separate its actions from their everyday lives. The Loman family lives in any East coast suburban neighborhood; many of the audience members probably grew up there, know someone who did, or maybe returned to similar dwellings after the performance. The audience might see a Willy Loman when they walk out the theater doors and onto the street. Realism breeds proximity, and the closer to the real world the audience is, the more it sympathizes with those characters. We feel for Willy Loman: broken, disillusioned, and tossed about on the waves of contemporary history. Miller captures the fear and loathing, the passion and pain, the grief and loss classical characters experienced, and places them in a reachable place. No wonder critics respond so forcefully to the pathos of *Death of a Salesman*. Miller both re-created the tragic model of drama in a twentieth-century vein, and crafted characters who resemble everyday people and situations. Yet Steinberg leaves unresolved the source of the tragedy: Willy's individual make-up, or the pressures of his alienating world.

Frye's Archetypal Approach to Tragedy

Why has some genre of tragedy been continuous in our history? In Western culture it stretches from Ancient Greece to Shakespeare's Globe. No other critic better captures this subject in the 20th Century than Northrop Frye. In his *The Anatomy of Criticism*, he explores the different archetypes found in literary genres and offers a means by which to analyze them. He speaks mainly about the less generalized sense of "tragedy." In his third essay, "The Theory of Myths," he explain there are "seasons" of literary archetypes, beginning with *Spring* as comedy, *Summer* as romance, *Autumn* as

tragedy, and *Winter* as irony and satire. Surely Miller's play has fallen in critical esteem because our culture has moved into its Winter, where irony, in the guise of critical theory, so much of our academic discourse. Stanley Cavell, a contemporary philosopher who wrote about language and about Shakespeare, provides a fine statement of our dilemma:

What else have we had, in major art of the past hundred years, but indirectness: irony, theatricality, yearning, broken forms, denial of art, anti-heroes, withdrawals from nature, from man, from the future, and from the past . . . We are not Tragic heroes: our sacrifices will not save the State. Yet we are sacrificed, and we sacrifice. Exemplary, because in our age, which not only does not know what it needs, but which no longer even demands anything, but takes what it gets, and so perhaps deserves it; where every indirectness is a dime-a-dozen, and any weirdness can be assembled and imitated on demand-the thing we must look for, in each book for, in each case, is the man who, contrary to appearances, and in spite of all, speaks. (178-179)

For the purposes of this paper, then, autumn is the season most relevant to Miller and his constructs. Frye believes that any analysis requires delving into classical forms of literature if we are to grasp their influence on the modern literary world. Mankind is exemplified in the discourse of tragedy; it highlights man's struggle through the hero's tragic fall.

. . . the typical tragic hero is somewhere between the divine and the 'all too human.' This must be true even of dying gods: Prometheus, being a god, cannot die, but he suffers for his sympathy for the 'dying ones' (brotoi) or 'mortal' men, and even suffering has something subdivine about it. The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune necessity, circumstance, or any combination of the these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is the mediator with it. (207)

Frye makes a good many references in this paragraph, but most striking is the concept of the tragic hero. Frye observes that the hero can be either divine or mortal, without that

status, altering the importance of the tragic hero. This notion leads to Miller's connection of the tragic myth and the importance of the common man. For Miller, it is not enough to make the characters mere "mortal" men; they must be the everyday men, the common American walking among us.

As Frye states, the hero's suffering is a critical feature, for there is always something "subdivine" about suffering. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Unbound* the Greek mortal is punished by Zeus for betraying him by stealing the secret of fire and giving it to mankind instead. For his punishment, Prometheus is fettered to a boulder while vultures rip open his chest and eat his liver day after day. Frye uses this example to point out that even the divine figure of a god, chained and imprisoned creates pathos in the viewer's experience. Through suffering human emotions and consequently empathy arises. The audience immediately reacts with pity to the sight of Prometheus wounded and in agony as the play opens. This ability to elicit empathy in the viewer is a key element of the tragic vehicle for Frye. It also sidetracks the god-hood or status of a character to that of human scale.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, the protagonist emerges as a suffering martyr, a messianic figure willing to sacrifice his freedom for the good of mankind. Zeus is not seen as a king of Mount Olympus, but as a tyrant, able and willing to execute justice as he wants, regardless of Prometheus' good intentions. Zeus functions, like Job's God, as an archetype for all the impersonal forces of the universe. Audiences see Prometheus suffer, feeling his agony and cries for justice. Even though Prometheus is divine, his suffering lowers him into a bond with the audience. Prometheus has no character flaw.

He suffers because of his “hamartia,” his “error.” All gods and mortals in Greek stories are subject to hamartia, for none of them can know more than their lot in life allows. Prometheus tells the audience that perhaps his biggest mistake was to believe that Zeus would be more lenient with him for breaking the law of Olympus. The figure of Prometheus suffering underscores the fate of all tragic figures, binding them together as imperfect. Watching the figure on the stage, we see Prometheus as our stand-in, a representation of man’s suffering amidst the processes of cosmic history.

Willy Loman performs the same function as Prometheus, although by much different means. Willy is not fettered to a rock, enduring endless torture for the sake of mankind’s good. Instead he is entrapped in his own delusions, unable to confront the reality of his failures. Likewise, Willy is a tragic hero, the stand-in, embodiment of loss and ignorance, undergoing his plight in the real world. He is no god or demi-god, just a middle-class American. Even the pun of his last name, a play on the “low man,” is clever on Miller’s part, if a bit too heavy-handed (like his naming of one son “Happy”). The figure of Zeus is the social and economic restrictions which prohibit Willy from advancing in the world, even from dreaming. The characters wealthier in status and class--his neighbor Charley, the company mogul Howard, and Bernard--are less

antagonistic than sympathetic towards Willy's plight. Willy's tyrant, his nemesis, is one that we cannot see; it reflects itself only in Willy's faults, fears, and insecurities.

The play begins *in medias res*. The audience watches Willy's haggard form enter the stage in exhaustion and drop his suitcases. As for the Willy's hamartia, it is obvious from the beginning of Act I that he is mentally deranged by the weight of routine and past failures. He is also filled with self-doubt, so much so that he constantly lies about his actions, talents, and abilities. He has also been living in a fictionalized state for so long that he has started to believe his fabrication. Willy refused to accept that Biff was failing his math class, and bought into the delusion that--as Biff did--the teacher had something against him. This, of course, was not true, and Biff, like Willy, chooses not to see his own faults, which builds toward the play's conclusion, where Biff stands in opposition to his father.

Frye also highlights the links between life and death commonly found in tragedy. The fact that Willy is a "brotoi," the "dying one" (or mortal man), makes Miller's work a good example. Frye postulates a sense of "dying" daily as a mortal's purpose, both in drama and the real life; *Death of a Salesman* illustrates this sense by the use of foreshadowing. The hose found by Biff, Willy's attempts to crash his car, and his final crash at the play's conclusion point to the inescapable fact that mortal men must die. But Miller is illustrating not simply the mortality all men share, but the tragedy of a life un-lived. Willy is truly a tragic figure as the audience watches him descend down into delirium. Indeed, the fact that he is mortal pales in comparison to the loss of his aspirations. That he has not fulfilled the dreams and accomplishments he strove towards

is one of the greatest tragedies: a tragedy meant for the common man. Frye wants to illustrate through his example of Prometheus that the figure of the tragic hero is a mediator between the audience and tragic elevation. As Prometheus stands in the gap for the good of mankind, so does every tragic hero, the pivotal point through which the audience can experience their fears and compassion. Frye claims that “Like comedy, tragedy is best and most easily studied in drama, it is not confined to drama, although not actions that end in disaster” (207). It is not so much that Willy Loman dies at the end of the play--delusional and unable to face his failures--but the fact that his memory, his life, and his accomplishments add up to nothing. The antithesis of life and death is poignant in *Death of a Salesman*, because death does not simply conclude the effect of the play; it prods the audience to examine their own existence.

Moss' Neo-Hegelian Interpretation of Tragedy

Another approach to tragedy, as suggested in this chapter's opening, has grown from writings of Hegel. As I suggested, he views tragedy as originating in the struggle of consciousness to overcome its subject-object bifurcation, whereby a person experiences alienation from the world. Leonard Moss' “The Unrecognized Influence of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy” makes a partially successful attempt to illuminate the major influences of Hegel on 20th-century concepts of tragedy. Hegel examined tragic forms and theories, in a post-religious context. In the Middle Ages, drama was extremely limited. Closely sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, the dramatist needed to eschew the models of the bawdy pagan, comedies of Roman theatre. Greek drama would

have been a great discovery for the Medieval church, as so many of its Biblical principles appeared to the language of Platonic philosophy. Unfortunately, most Greek texts were not salvaged until well after the crusades, as they had been preserved in Aramaic since the sacking of Greece. Dramas of the Medieval era had to focus on enacting orthodox spiritual beliefs or Biblical stories. He sought a concept of tragedy free from the religious dogma of the church. Hegel began to survey the developments of drama from what we refer to as the dawn of modern drama--Shakespeare, Calderon, and Racine. According to Moss, if not for scholars like Bradley and others, the Hegelian vision might have been excluded from evaluations of modern tragic development.

Moss begins by noting the importance of Aristotelian tragic discourse in the *Poetics*, as a factor in Hegel's reasoning. He then attempts the formidable task of summarizing Hegel's insight:

Hegel made his chief contribution to recent literary criticism when he applied this theory to the history of Greek and 'modern' (post-medieval) tragedy. He contended that Greek dramatists conceived the tragic genre in its purist form because their characters express human energy directed towards the achievement of aims more 'serious' than unrestrained self-indulgence. Modern drama, in contrast, has celebrated egocentric personality divorced from the from ethical commitment. (92)

It was enough for Aristotle to be content with evoking "panic" and "empathy" in his analysis of tragic effects on audiences. But Hegel pushes further-- towards historical actualization and ontological novelty. The concept of self-development therefore dominates Hegel's works. According to Moss, his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a complex discourse on the maturation, and evolution, of consciousness. Hegel wants catharsis to purge the older forms of self, and press towards a newly emergent self. Of

course strands of the former self remain, only now refigured into larger patterns of more inclusive purpose. Tragedy, in Hegel's eyes, could help fulfill this process: as a character is brought through the struggles of tragic events, he largely deconstructs a former self in moving towards a new one. Miller at times seems to ascribe this process to Biff, but he doesn't keep this aim clearly in focus. As Willy's son, Biff was as self-centered and completely sold on the "castles in the air" fantasies that Willy has filled him with. But once Biff painfully struggles with the truth of his father's infidelity, he sometimes seems to undergo a metamorphosis. The play never settles this possibility for us.

The old intimacy of religion and drama, so prevalent in the Dark and Middle Ages, is unheard of at today. The landscape of *Death of a Salesman* is amoral. This divorce between what is ethical and what is egocentric, Moss explains as a by-product of Hegelian thought. Moss goes on to say that, "In a modern romantic poetry, on the contrary, it is the individual's passion, the satisfaction of which can only be relative to a wholly personal end . . ." (92). In the modern realism of stage tragedy, the focus on the individual's wants and desires is paramount. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy, Biff, and Happy all exist in egocentric, disillusioned realms of their own making. Happy proudly tells Biff in Act I that he could have any girl in the office whom he wants, and that he is just a promotion away from running the business. As the plot unfolds in Act II and the truth comes out, it is clear that Happy is just as much of a nobody as Willy. He is a blatant womanizer, professionally headed nowhere. At the ending of the play, Happy continues to embrace Willy's useless dreams and ideals, with little hope of furthering himself in the world.

Moss's key point is the relevance of Hegel's tragic analysis to modern drama.

He rather reluctantly boils down Hegel's thesis:

The term *subjective* refers to the 'personal conscious life' of the passionate individual seeking 'self-determination.' In contrast, the term *substantive*, denoting ethical, universal, or essential, refers to the enduring content of family, national, and religious codes. An ideal play exhibits characters who relate one component to the other: they may be interesting as unique individuals, but at the same time they make positive ethical claims that go beyond purely positive or inward goals. Tragedy requires, first, that vital personalities be inflexibly committed to objective principles. (92)

To take these terms as a very simplified means of analysis, the subjective is "personal conscious life," that inward self-determination that drives the individual. The "substantive" is that force or proclivity towards the demarcation of social mores, codes, and derived from institutional stability. The objective principles are those that drive or shape the individual from the outside, the exterior forces which press on characters' choices. This differs from the "substantive" in the sense that the objective is a motive drive, the substantive a set of existing rules and codes. The objective principle only functions when the character is motivated by a commitment to communal good: a social motive, as it were. Moss argues that in 20th-century tragedy, many characters are still struggling with their subjective nature, which in turn structures their cathartic experience. In *Death of a Salesman*, the subjective and the substantive exists in dialectical conflict. We see the set of characters, not united, but centering on his or her personal struggles; Willy and his failures, Happy and his narcissism, and Biff with his emotional paralysis. Even Linda exhibits more of a subjective than substantive nature as she frets about tactics for appeasing the family.

As for the substantive, Miller litters his play with markers of the social, codes and institutions that and force characters into action. The economic forces include the race for money, keeping up with the neighbors, desperate expectations of fulfill an American dream of happiness, serene and resplendent. The complications hindering characters are an incredibly rigid class structure, and of conspicuous consumption (Willy buys the car and the washer, all the while confronting the continuous need for house repair). Moss argues that 20th-century tragedy is foredoomed to never reach its objectives. The substantive and the subjective tear at and divide each character's attention, trapping them all in fleeting moments of self-indulgence and egocentrism. Miller's characters are unable to shake free from the self-absorbed world of their epoch of history. At the end of the play, perhaps Biff has the best chance of becoming an objective being, able to do good and better society, but again Miller doesn't make that clear. Miller's "Tragedy and the Common Man," in part, ratifies Moss' theory:

The Greeks could probe very heavenly origins of their ways and return to confirm the rightness of the laws. And Job could face God in anger, demanding his right and end in submission. But for a moment everything is suspension, nothing is accepted, and in the stretching and tearing apart of the cosmos, in the very actions of so doing, the character gains 'size,' the tragic stature which is spuriously attached to the royal or the highborn in our minds. The commonest of men may take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world (3).

Miller wants his audience to see the plight, the flaws, the tragic passing of lives unrecognized by the world; in turn, this spectacle might force the viewers to examine their own purposes and identities in the grand scheme of life. But does Miller show his characters as actually throwing all they have "into the contest, the battle"? As he

further states, “Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly” (3). This concept of evaluation underlies Miller’s work. He creates a cathartic end result, for the audience. Miller’s characters, however, never seem to become free of their delusions and misconceptions:

No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any in situation, habit or custom as being either everlasting, immutable or inevitable. In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attacks and examination. Which is not to say that tragedy must preach revolution. (3)

Miller constantly brings up this idea of tragedy as a “revolutionary” vehicle or process by which life can be examined. His idea is very much implies hope of a modernist vein, the thought of awakening or shocking the public through means of violence. Consider such American writers as Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O’Connor, Lillian Hellman, Eugene O’Neill, and Susan Glaspell. The techniques of applying the violent or the repulsive to force an examination of the darker motives of mankind brings into sharp relief and challenges the realism of Miller. Miller, like many of his fellow writers and artists, was disgusted with the averse and rampant capitalism he saw around them. In the years following World War II, America experienced prosperity on a level never before seen. After the lean years of the Great Depression and the paucity of the World War II years, the American public experienced a population boom as well as an economic one. It was the status quo, the predominant ideology of main-stream American culture, to consume in abundance. After two decades of rice and lentils, it was time for steak, and steak every night. The rhetoric of the day was to buy now and pay later, acquire all the household

items your neighbors had and then some. Wasn't that the American dream? To have and achieve all the things your parents were unable to have? This use of "revolutionary" rhetoric and ideas led Miller to be labeled a socialist (Mason 659-660). This, argues Jeffery Mason, led to the Cultural Revolution, which was not met without resistance. Miller was before his time in many respects: particularly as an heroic participant in the McCarthy Trails of the 1950s--which eventually led to his play *The Crucible*. Then followed the turbulent and uncertain era of change the 1960s wrought. Mason argues that Miller saw it all.

Death of a Salesman won Miller the Pulitzer Prize on May 10, 1949; and it had opened on Broadway only months before. It also won him the Critics Choice Award, the Antoinette Perry Award, the Theater Club Award, and the "Front Page" Award all in the same year. 1949 was the highlight, the beginning of success, and launched Miller into the public spotlight, making him a household name in the process. It also made his work and rhetoric highly susceptible to the scrutinizing eyes of anti-Communists, like Senator Joseph McCarthy. Miller was outspoken about the unfair treatment of writers. The black-listing of artists was not in line with Miller's vision of change. In 1956, he appeared before the House Committee of Un-American Actions. There, in an effort to root out an "un-American" activities, Miller and other writers were questioned publicly about their socialist and Communist political leanings. Miller was later acquitted, but only after undergoing a great deal of public humiliation by the experience (Mason 665). What is interesting about this episode in Miller's career is that some critics thought his revolutionary claims too politically driven, while others thought he offered insufficient

themes. *Death of a Salesman* was not the play that brought him to trial; it was *The Crucible*, a play about the Salem Witch trials as a metaphor for the McCarthy Trials. If one lesson can be taken from the exploits of Willy Loman, it is Miller's impulse to wake people from their apathy, to show them that a life lies hidden in the daily grind, the ins-and-outs of making it, scraping together a *living* and not an *existence*. It is a testament to the hunger, the unsatisfied lives Americans lived; and it implied a thirst for something more than the status quo, the mundane. The play cannot, however, be claimed as a work that presents a way out. In this respect Miller remains ambivalent. Perhaps Stanley Kauffmann is correct in noting that Miller "finds himself in a world with a wispy ethos and a dim cosmology . . . and some of that desolation is must necessary be in himself" (103).

Conclusion

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* embodies the tragic archetypes and elements that traditional theatre has heralded for centuries. It serves as one of the pivotal turning points in American drama, because Miller's play emphasizes tragedy for the average, the common, the American man. It stands in the middle of the 20th Century like a double-faced Janus, looking to the realm of the past tragic forms and recreating them in a new assertion. One of the real values *Death of a Salesman* serves is to take its place as one of the classics, gaining a place in the canon of American drama and surviving the ever changing maelstrom of popular and unpopular contemporary literature. Miller's play continues to be taught and performed in public high schools, colleges, community

theatres, and universities alike. An interesting element about *Death of a Salesman* is that some critics (all late 20th century) claim that Miller's early plays were popular for the singular reason that they were provocative during their own time, but no longer deserve this classical status. A more important question to ask may be why should we care about a classic at all? What is enduring one day may be uninteresting the next. But the problem then becomes, if you do not care about the classics, then what do you value? The newspaper clippings that make up our current culture? The sex-plastered advertisements of the digital age around us? Will they last? Perhaps. But more importantly we respect the classics because it is they that have withstood the test of time. The very term "classic" implies that it has survived the ravages of every trend and fashion society has presented. "In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is owing to a paucity of heroes among us . . . For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy-or tragedy above us" (Miller 3). We hold to heroes as we hold to the classics, for the simple fact that there is some enduringly human need for them. Our modern hero has become a human being--one among the countless species threatened with extinction.

CHAPTER III

MILLING IN THE GARDEN: THE AMERICAN ADAM

AND PLANTING THE □ AMERICAN DREAM □

IN MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

“What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up/Like a raisin in the sun?/Or fester like a sore/ And then run?” (Hughes 252). Langston Hughes’ words reflect the poignancy of a “dream deferred: something that has been planted, nurtured, encouraged to grow, yet does not come to fruition. Although Hughes is writing about the plight of African-Americans, poised between despair and revolutions, the metaphor of a “dream deferred” penetrates Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman chases doggedly the “American Dream”: money, social status, a well-kept home, a happy family, and respectability, both economically and socially. From the beginning of the play, however, Miller underscores the hollowness of such pursuits: that a person creates a self only to stratify the demands of others, to win their approval or love, while becoming beneath these forged appearances a self of deceit and shame with no rescue possible from the day-to-day demands of the chase, Willy Loman’s fate recalls the close of *The Great Gatsby* set twenty-five years earlier:

. . . I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in the vast obscurity of the city, where the dark fields of the republic roll on under the night. Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us, it eludes us then, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further . . . And one fine morning--So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past (189).

Fitzgerald, like Miller, represents the pained emptiness of a dream deferred: one that seems within the reach of the pursuer, yet is already dead from the life of lies and false fronts. The American dream is like that green light, the shining promise of a better future, never to be attained. Hughes' poem suggests two outcomes of dreams indefinitely postponed: 1) to "dry up," in which he uses the simile "Like a raisin in the sun" to imply despair; and 2) to "fester like a sore/And then run," which suggests some explosion, perhaps individual, perhaps social resolution. These same two closures to deferral help define the themes in *Death of a Salesman*. This chapter will highlight the interaction of three cultural myths: the garden, the West, and the American dream.

The image of the garden is an ancient one in literary art, dating back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and permeating pre-Danielic Israel. The Garden of Eden provides the Biblical setting of man's beginning. Eden is a paradise--lush, fruitful, and full of provisions. There Adam and Eve do not exhaust themselves toiling for food; they enjoy creation, with all its bounty; they are immortal in a paradise without end. But, alas, paradise cannot endure. Adam and Eve lose their place in this perfect world after being seduced by the serpent to disobey God's immutable commands; they eat the forbidden fruit. Allegorically, they try to stretch beyond their limits. Thereby they surrender their

immortality and cannot stay in the garden owing to their untrustworthy nature. Mankind, cast out into the wilderness, must struggle arduously for the rest of their days; mankind must create a mutable garden to ensure even limited survival. This metaphorical story reminds humans that there is no Eden for them any longer; Edens are all “dreams deferred,” green lights shining in the darkness of the past. Instead s belong together and must create civilizations to meet their needs; the city is the outcome of man’s own construction. Richard Waswo stresses this interpretation in *Founding Legends of Western Civilization*, wherein he traces the growing importance of urban environments and the transplantation of myths which fit this human construct and form a foundation for culture. He notes that the etymology of “culture” comes from the Latin word “cultum,” meaning “to cultivate” (3). The ability to plant and tend crops implies a burdensome responsibility: to have a culture, one must construct and sustain an agrarian community. The labor will never be finished. Waswo points out that the ability to cultivate can lead to a “civis,” the Latin word for “city” and origin of the term “civilization.” Those who lack an agrarian society, i.e. hunter-gather cultures, remain barbaric and uncivilized because they lack a “cultivated” society, they are unable to formulate a prescribed set of social rules that stability requires. But what happens when one *does* follow the rules, and still fails to achieve social status? How does “social status” replace survival as a sufficient goal? These questions engage Miller in *Death of a Salesman*.

Although 1940s America may be far removed from antiquity, the concept of necessary toil remains part of mankind daily struggle. Willy Loman works all of his life as a salesman, as a cog in the network geared to mass produce not only multiple new

products to be sold, but also to create ever-expanding new *desires* by making people feel they always *need* something they do not possess. Willy adheres to the social codes and rigorously follows them. Sadly, none of his efforts (including his falls into dishonesty) are ever enough. Indeed, the tragic irony is Willy's agency in the system designed to keep people from satisfaction; and he succeeds, within the system, only to be surprised that he is his own victim. He is and remains as the play closes a little man, a meaningless man to all but his family. Miller presents various and unreconciled reasons for his failings, but the dominant point is that Willy follows the social rules designed to leave everyone lacking internal fulfillment. The social expectations placed upon him and his family are constructed and remain unattainable, while forcing people to betray their dreams.

Waswo investigates other myths deeply rooted in the Western psyche. He argues that myths sustain cultural values because through them cultures find an identity --and identity requires a concept of continuity: of a beginning, past, and the hope of a future. He points out that there is a sense of "transmission" whereby a culture can often be transplanted, like a crop, from one place to another. Waswo illustrates this idea using various cultures, foremost among these the establishment of the Roman civilization, which relied heavily on Greek myths to found its empire. In the *Aeneid*, for example, the myth of a destroyed Troy and its survivors is the founding basis of Virgil's explanation of the Roman heritage: "The founding myth is one way of explaining what historical circumstances are seen to have produced. All the retellings of the story of Troy . . . had made it 'possible to elaborate the Trojan origin of every European people . . .'" (5). Virgil looked to the lineage of Trojan bloodline as a means of providing a legitimate

explanation of Roman superiority, whereby the Romans established their role as descendants of Greek royalty. Different forms of myth can be transplanted to suit the needs of people. Different European nations built themselves upon myths, and this did not stop as the exploration of the New World began.

The Puritans took up the myth of the garden, including man's ability to work and sustain the garden in the conquerable land of North America. This idea of the garden had filtered through the annals of history and into the "New World," where colonies were planted in early American settlements. The New England wilderness was an ideal setting for the separatist group of religious Puritans, and with it their beliefs. There, the harsh wilderness was seen either as another Garden of Eden that must be tended and cultivated, or as a treacherous wilderness in need of civilization. The garden could be cared for only by man and man alone. It mattered not that other cultures existed, that tribes of Native Americans called this region home. Instead, America the "new land," needed to be cultivated by a *civilized* people. The new world was a vast wilderness, supposedly "untouched" and in need of proper cultivation. This vast project gave rise to the so-called Puritan work ethic, and ultimately to the entrepreneurial spirit found in the modern American business world. The Puritan work ethic implied that if a man worked rigorously enough, then he would succeed. Such social expectation greatly affected Arthur Miller. The compelling force of social expectations flows through *Death of Salesman*. Miller's characters are drowning in the ideals and presumptive prize of social status everywhere around them. From the "keeping up with the Jones'--which can be seen as Willy reacts competitively with his next door neighbor Charley--to the material

pressure of the consumer world, the Lomans have neither peace nor hope of ever being satisfied.

Stephen Lawrence's, "The Right Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*," focuses on the social forces that are key elements in Miller's ideological assumptions throughout the play: "If Willy is responsible for his own downfall, what are we to make of all the suggestions of a sick and distorted society?" (547). Miller provides no clear answer to this question. Lawrence makes a case for blaming the social expectations placed upon Willy Loman, which are so extensive that he cannot grasp the contradictions in his world. Lawrence argues that the overwhelming social pressure Miller places on his characters enables his audience to view their hopeless plight as workers in the system of the business world. He also detects the Puritan idea of the "fall." This is a fall not just in the sense of Willy's personal failings; he is depicted in a "fallen state" from the very outset, as man living in exile from the garden. Lawrence also stresses the fallenness of the society around him. Happiness is unattainable. Happy metabolizes the social myth of the American dream when Lawrence makes use of a question from Happy: "He [Willy] fought it out here, and this is where I'm going win it for him.' The battle must be fought on the enemy's grounds. Man does not solve his problems as a social animal, retreating out of the society" (548). The "enemy," for Lawrence, is American society. The social expectations and the pursuit of consequent illusory dreams is something that Happy has no chance of achieving anymore than his father; like Willy, he will always be a cog in keeping the system running. The business world of Miller's time was recovering from World War II, and experiencing prodigious prosperity. Buy, buy, buy; and work, work,

work. Do this, and the fruits of your labours will multiply: this was the implicit message on every billboard and radio advertisement, of every salesman. Anything you want can be yours if you just dream big and work harder. Miller debunks that ideology as he dramatizes the tragic downward spiraling of Willy's demise.

Lawrence also implies that the pursuit of these American ideals, or dreams, is a fantasy generated by the forces of the status quo. According to him, Miller perfectly captures the contradictions within the "Salesman culture." Lawrence notes that, "What redeems Willy is not the idea of dreaming itself: 'A salesman has got to dream.' We are not to settle for the idea that the very fact of dreaming makes men noble. In the Requiem, Happy, Biff, Charley all try to grasp at the essence of Willy, but each of them falls short" (549). The life of a salesman is to "sell the dream." And to sell the dream he must also buy into the American *belief* in that dream. Sadly, Willy Loman has nothing to show for his labor other than an insurance policy which will support Linda. If he really had fulfilled his aspirations, Willy would have been able to pay off the house with his commissions long ago. Miller strips bare his characters, leaving them psychologically vulnerable in order to show the larger failings of the culture around them. Biff is perhaps the singular exception to this rule as the play ends: "When Happy declares that he is going to take over where his father left off, we share with Biff what Miller refers to as 'a hopeless glance at Happy'" (547). Hopelessness is what Miller leaves his audience with. As Lawrence illustrates, the dream Willy chases is a dream designed to remain unfulfilled and empty.

The idea of wilderness in American culture is another outcome of myth, an

idealized image of the West as infinite opportunity just beyond the horizon. *Death of a Salesman* makes numerous references to the “West” or wilderness, particularly as seen through Willy’s fantasies of conversations with his brother, Ben. Like the Puritans before him, Willy imagines rich possibilities of the wild Yukon and Alaskan territory while conversing with his deceased brother. Although his encounters are extensions of his generalized penchant for fantasy, they offer powerful and poignant descriptions of the wilderness as a symbol of unknown prosperity. Ben made it big, as did their father before him--striking out into the untamed, unknown wilds, and (through pure entrepreneurial spirit) achieving the wealth and status Willy craves. He dreams of setting off with Ben, after Ben, in pursuit of Ben’s dream, a version of the same type of hero worship his two sons share. But in the end, the wilds and wilderness remains nothing more than a dream, an empty symbol with no reward to show for it. Ben and Willy are dead by the close of the play.

Richard Slotkin makes an interesting case about American culture and its fascination with the western frontier in *The Fatal Environment*. He meticulously chronicles the American literary tradition and other cultural factors that implant the myth of the “West” in our psyche. Western heroes are of mythic stature and are pervasively entrenched in American literature, from the rugged buckskinned Hawkeye to Davy Crockett and his last stand at the Alamo; myths of the *American West* are part of our everyday existence. But it also contains a fatal quality, a danger to be cautious of; because if you stray too far into the wild, it can kill you. Slotkin explains this definition after explicating a Whitman poem telling of Custer’s fall at Little Bighorn: “Fatal

Environment': the phrase literally refers to Custer being surrounded by Indians . . . Custer's death completes a meaningful myth-historical design, a grand fable of national redemption and Christian self-sacrifice, acted out in the most traditional American setting" (11). As Slotkin illustrates, this mythologizing of the West, the frontier, is a romanticized dream of "anywhere else but here," a cultural construction that man's heart so longs for. Custer's death parallels Ben's death in Willy's mind. His brother died heroically, with accomplishments. This, of course echoes Willy's own hopes and dreams. It matters not that Ben died, bereft and alone, with no family; it is the dream of the frontier, of the West, that Willy aspires to. Ben's visage and appearances in Willy's daydreams are a symbol for the opportunities and achievements of the entrepreneurial spirit: if a man works hard and is ambitious, he can achieve the wealth of the wild.

Slotkin goes on to say, ". . . the Frontier myth whose categories still inform our political rhetoric of pioneering progress, world mission and eternal strife with the forces of darkness and barbarianism. It is this myth with its fictive fatalities lurk in the cultural environment we inhabit" (12). The idea of the darkness, the barbarian, or outcast goes back to Waswo's treatment of the civis and the wilderness. If man is not civilized, if he does not come in from the wilderness, then society cannot operate. On the other hand, the western wilds of the American wilderness idealize a wonderland of opportunity for the smart and the strong. It seems to be culturally acceptable to venture out into the wilderness, but one must always be able to return to civilization. Whatever "wealth" the West has to offer will become "wealth" only within a culture that accords value to it. The western myth is ultimately parasitical on a pre-existing, structured civilization. Willy's

fears, insecurities, and self-delusions, keep him from pursuing this myth. At the same time, there can be no actual separation from the city, the urban, the civis. Even Biff, who has been working in the farm country of the Midwest, comes back to the city. From the middle of the Nineteenth Century, social history records the inexorable deprovincialization of the wilderness. One journey alone promises escape for Willy. He has planned his suicide, but the symbolic nature of his death is its own fulfillment of his dream of going out West. It remains fatal fantasy that greets the other characters with his end. The wilderness is a *fatal environment*, a sterile ideological construct which incentivizes civilization to expand and incorporate ever more land and resources.

Steven Feldman explores such myths in his rendering of Miller's play in a symbolic, psycho-analytical reading. In his essay, "Weak Spot in Business Ethics," he takes the stance that Ben not only symbolizes Willy's unconscious desire to gain prosperity, but also the unknown, which Willy fears. Feldman uses the idea of the "jungle" as a symbol for the business world, the social realm, and the interior workings of hope generating insecurities and denials. He begins by looking at the motif of the wilderness, and more specifically the "jungle," through Willy's regressive memories. The summation of Willy's memories surfaces most vividly in two instances in the play. One is the flashback that exposes Willy's extramarital affair. Coming towards the end of the play, it represents what Feldman calls the "loss of memories" and a "blinding" of Biff (394). In this state, Biff finds himself figuratively lost in a jungle of his own making, crippled socially by the loss of his idealization of Willy. In discovering his father's adultery, Biff discovers the fatuousness of his dependence on Willy's approval. With his

dreams crushed, his internal self-worth and self-confidence gone. Up to that point, Willy's opinion was the center of his world; the singular light in a dark expanse and a voice in the jungle of life. By uncovering his father's flaws, Biff is thrown alone into a jungle, a psychological state that disables him from coping with the world and his future. Biff takes on the symbolic role of the outcast, a figure bereft of an interior life, adrift in a dense jungle. Feldman next underscores the importance of the scene where Willy introduces his imaginary, deceased brother. Ben and Biff begin to spar, when "Ben trips Biff and holds the point of his umbrella over his eye, saying 'never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way'" (394). This is Willy's fantasy, wherein Feldman claims that Ben teaches Biff a lesson, because such teaching is what Willy wanted to do but is afraid. Eventually Ben, is often a clumsy vehicle for Miller's didacticism. Biff is in the jungle his father constructs for him, one that spoils all of his dreams for the future.

The second element of the jungle concerns Willy's obsession with business and success. Ben states in the play, "Father was a very great and very wild-hearted man" (Miller, 49). The implication is that something wild and untameable existed in their father, and *that* something must also exist in Ben. Willy constructs these images of how life ought to be as a negative compensation for his lack of them. This reveals the "inner incompleteness" that Willy feels, and it expresses his compulsions to live in regressive memories. Feldman points out, "Ben made his riches in Africa, in the 'jungle.' The jungle represents the business competition of the story" (394). It is also the projection of Willy's failings. He sees Ben as the success story, the one person who made it big, both in life

and in business. But for Willy, the wilderness is unforgiving, a brutal symbol of the urban economic jungle that entraps him in American culture. The jungle is harsh and unforgiving, like the business world around Willy, making his success a greater impossibility with each passing year. In this sense, his sons are fated to follow his example of dishonesty and of insignificant accomplishments. His faults are varied, from cheating at cards while playing with Charley to his sexual philandering. Willy passes his self-deceptive habits to Biff, his womanizing to Happy. Both brothers learn these practices from their father's example. Jungles cannot be cultivated, cannot be tamed. Symbolic dreams grow there, but not the Lomans' dreams. All of this illustrates Feldman's concluding point, that the business world is the psychic cancer of the American century. Published in 2003, Feldman's article notes that over 50 years earlier, Miller could see the metaphoric "writing on the wall" (403). Like a man ahead of his time, Miller shows the individual workings of the human psyche for the purpose of exposing the central requirement of self-deception in our society: "If you want to understand a culture, look at the ethics of the time" (392). This interior examination of the individual is a projection of the self-condemning hope and faith of one person: the rotting that precedes utter despair.

In his much earlier work, *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis explores the motif of American writers attempting to recreate the image of the modern man. Culture plays a main role in Lewis' argument: "every culture seems, as it advances towards maturity, to provide its own determining debate over the ideas that preoccupy it . . . The debate, indeed, the culture, at least on its loftiest levels; for culture achieves identity" (1-

2). To define the American culture is to define the American identity. As Lewis lays out his premise and examples, he relies on numerous literary works that lay the foundation for the 20th century literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, and Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*. They pave the way for writers like Miller to examine Americans in the post-World War II world. Lewis brings in the motif of Eden, as he claims: "The significance fact that the literal use of the story of Adam and the Fall of Man-as a model for the narrative-occurs in the final works of American novelist, the works in which they sought to summarize the whole of their experience of America" (6). He believes that all these novels contain an "Adamic protagonist," each telling the story of the garden, the fall, the exile, and the return or redemption.

In truth, it is the Second Adam, or the Christ of the New Testament, that preoccupies the American writer. Adam and Eve sinned, and humanity suffered for it. But according to Christian doctrine Christ was the Second Adam: the perfect man able to take upon himself the sins of the world, suffering so that humanity might be redeemed from Adam's mistake. Lewis argues that this is part of Christian subtext in 19th-century American literature, whereby the story of Christ and his redemption is told vicariously. *Billy Budd*, for example, is Christ-like in his unwavering innocence and belief in the benevolence of mankind. Claggart, warped by nature, moves with pure malevolent intentions towards the whole of the ship's crew. This embodies more than a simple dichotomy between good and evil; it is a retelling of Christ's story. In this tale, Billy must die in place of another. Innocent of his crime, he defeats Claggart, ending his reign of

terror on the ship, but losing his life by being hanged. All of this harkens back to the Puritan roots of American culture and stretches ahead to the brokenness of the 20th Century. Miller makes Willy into a diminished Billy, innocent of evil intentions, but unable to redeem anyone. Moreover, Miller's Second Adam is far from self-sacrificing; he is conniving, deceitful, lecherous, and unfaithful to every member of his family. There is no solemn scene, with Willy ascending the ship's deck to be sacrificed as a lamb to the slaughter. And his "self-sacrifice" is far from effective. Lewis argues that writers of the 20th Century F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, William Faulkner's *The Bear*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*--all embody a spirit that breaks with their nineteenth-century predecessors. The contemporary goal of authors was not to recreate Christ, but to present a still-fallen Adam--much truer version of the 20th-century American identity.

The motif of the garden certainly plays out in *Death of a Salesman*, both on symbolic and ideological levels. To return to the garden is to return to the idea of Adam in the garden. Symbolically, in the beginning Adam didn't need to toil, to labor for his survival in Eden; his existence was perfect. Materially all of his needs were met; socially he was satisfied with his role as caretaker and with his mate, Eve. Emotionally he is satisfied with himself and his existence. Eden is a psychological projection of man in his perfect state, without worries and cares. But, alas, Eden is not to last. After the fall (which is also the title of Miller's 1964 play), mankind must toil at his survival; he must construct a garden of his own making, both for nurturance and stability. Without sustenance, there can be no existence; and man also must operate both on a psychological

and a social plane.

Miller presents his characters in both lights, constructing a garden for symbolic and ideological needs. If we look at Willy Loman, we see a man after the fall, struggling to eke out a living on his meager income. Materially Willy, Linda, and their sons are always scrapping by. Linda darns her stockings to save money, calculates Willy's commission, and is always looking for means to provide for her husband and sons. Willy's basic material needs are met because of Linda's diligence. The audience sees this middle-class representation of America as a form of just hanging on. Socially, Willy is a friendless man, always trying to connect with others but unable to do so. Charley is his friend, and a faithful one at that, loaning him money, spending time with him, and one of the few people to show up to the funeral and give words of encouragement to Willy's loved ones. But Charley, as good as he is to Willy, is socially disconnected from him. Even during the card game in Act I, Willy's rambling journeys into his fantasies, together with his deceptive tactics of cheating, push Charley away. And he has pushed away and rejected others around him whenever they attempt to get close. Emotionally, Willy is a wreck. He is consumed by his fears, eaten by his insecurities, and rejected emotionally by Biff. He seeks fulfillment outside of his marriage, but his liaisons with women gives him no emotional fulfillment. In the end it is his affair--and its discovery by Biff--that leads to his break with his son, the closest emotional tie he has. Throughout the play, Willy searches for a way to fulfill his desires. The garden has come to represent much more than a symbol of human perfection. The modernist objective, man's search for meaning in a fallen and fractured world, surfaces in Miller's characters,

with the hopelessness of unfulfilled desires.

If man is in the garden, then what are we to make of the evil found there? Every story usually presents both a protagonist and an antagonist. Any discussion of evil and sin is really a discussion of what Leibnitz termed *theodicy*, an examination of the malevolent and fallen state of the human condition. In *Forbidden Knowledge*, Roger Shattuck examines the theodicy inherent in Classical and American literature. In his chapter, "Guilt, Justice and Empathy," he claims that Melville's *Billy Budd* is truly a "theodician tale," complete with an Adamic incarnation in the character of Billy: "The phrase [Melville's] 'mysteries of evil' (II Thessalonians 2:7) designates the existence of evil in a God-created world, the problem addressed by Leibnitz with the modern term *theodicy* . . . What absorbs Melville is how Claggart infects the innocent Billy through an obscure castration we call fate" (139). Like Adam against Satan, Billy must fall or be foiled by an antagonist, Claggart. In Miller's world, his protagonist is already fallen and morally frail, confronts neither serpent nor satanic figure designed to bring his downfall. All of Miller's characters paradoxically perpetuate and are broken by the social expectations they struggle to fulfill; they have potential, yet lack a social world within which they might reach fulfillment. Social forces rip Willy apart. His internal distress arises in part from his own insecurities, his inability to face his fears and failures. It is as if evil impregnates mankind, making every man his own serpent, his own Claggart. In this sense, Miller makes it impossible to separate Willy and his social world: his only interior self is his incarnated social world. The end result of Willy's toil in the garden of his life adds up to fatigue, anger, and resignation; and as Linda says, "A little man can be

just as tired as a big man” (Miller, 123). The American man and his American dream are wholly destroyed by the fallenness of Miller’s world, of the 20th-century society devouring them.

These themes link to the American dream as an ideal that must be planted in the minds of the people who adhere to it--just as the myth of Eden begins with man in the garden, then deposed from the garden into the wilderness, man is then left to make his own finite garden. In the Lomans’ case, there exists both figurative and literal gardens. Irving Jacobson’s ‘Family Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*’ looks at the dreams Miller plants in his characters, and the lack of fruit they bear. Jacobson maintains that “Family dreams extend backward in time to interpret the past, reach forward in time to project the future, and pressure reality in the present to conform to memory and imagination” (248). The “moment of truth” seems to come only through a shocking or violent act. Biff realizes that his father is having an affair, and that recognition shatters the castles in the air Willy has constructed for his son. Willy is not only connected to his past, he is entrapped by it by the vision of what *should be*, rather than *what is*. This unrealistic view of the world is past onto his wife Linda, who feeds the mythology he has created of being a “great” and successful salesman. His oldest son, Happy, also believes this American mythology surrounding his family. Biff is the only one awakened to the danger of this fallacious thinking, through the shock of his father’s infidelity. Miller relies on Biff’s moment of truth to deflate Willy’s persona completely. Jacobson employs the concepts of transformation, prominence, synthesis, and unity to explain the role of each Loman in the surrounding world: Willy dreams of prominence, Linda of unity, Happy of synthesis with

his wants, and Biff of transformation. These are the processes by which each character lives. Jacobson claims that no one but Biff is able to resist the pull of dreams. The idea of gardening comes up concerning Willy's dreams and hopes:

BIFF: What's he doing out there?

LINDA: He's planting the garden!

BIFF, *quietly*: Now? Oh, my God! (Miller, 125).

There is shock and disbelief in Biff and the others. But his family cannot see how gardening is actually Willy's final attempt to symbolically make things right. Like a used-up American Adam, he plants worthless seeds in an arid plot behind the house, with no hope of them coming to fruition. This scene in the kitchen is then juxtaposed to Willy's rambling to himself and Ben's showing up to discuss his insurance policy. Of course the conversation is actually Willy's plan for suicide and to leave the money and house to Linda and the boys. Willy's garden symbolizes his projection of hope and prosperity. Unfulfilled dreams also fester like Happy's unreachable desire to be popular and successful, Linda's hope for a functional, united family, and Biff's belief that he-like the Adonis or Hercules his father pictures him to be--can "make anything of yourselves" (Miller, 31). Willy's family is not happy. Biff steals, Happy womanizes, Linda pines, and Willy is driven mad by his failings and fears. Neither of Willy's sons has a wife, let alone children, and if they did get married would their children simply follow in their father's footsteps? This is the tragedy of the Lomans. That Willy has worked all of his life, be it self-centeredly, but also to shape a better life for his boys. There is the dawning realization of both Happy and Biff's faults as the play progresses, and the weakness of

both sons emerge from the fact that no one will endure to carry on the Loman legacy. Happy claims he will follow in his father's footsteps, but the audience, like Biff, remains skeptical of this proclamation. Happy has proven untrustworthy and unreliable when it comes to his promises. Miller leaves his audience with the belief that no amount of striving towards the American dream will help them. The garden of their life is bare, intellectually sterile, without any hope of revitalization. Their social dreams have dried up, one by one, and their personal hopes of a better life have been rotted and ruined with the bitter taste of rejection and failure. The American dream is an ideal, and for Miller, it is one filled with disappointment and heartache.

CHAPTER IV

MILLER AND O'NEILL

This chapter will explore the staging and design of scenes in *Death of a Salesman* by contrasting them with what Eugene O'Neill does in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, opening seven years later. Both plays center on a middle-class American family of a father, mother, and two sons well past college age. This contrastive analysis will attempt to show why the critical fortunes of the earlier play have sunken so far by demonstrating why the other play today occupies its position as the supreme achievement of American drama (Freedman 114).

To begin such a contrast means noticing how Willy Loman is by far the central character in his play, whereas all four Tyrone family members interact in roles of equal force. Miller builds his scenes around Willy, with the other three characters forced almost continually to focus on him. Miller constantly intermixes flashbacks from 18 years earlier as a means of revealing past events; and he also has Willy conduct multiple simultaneous conversations--with those present in the room and with other characters living his mind, as memories or imaginings. He is in and out of the present moment. O'Neill never uses flashbacks, but rather endows his characters with vivid memories that permeate present time. He creates his most powerful scenes with intense dialogues

between pairs of characters, or, more infrequently, all four characters together. Linda, Biff, and Happy play off of or react to Willy; James, Mary, Jamie, and Edmund each pull attention to themselves whenever they interact. O'Neill's scenes thereby derive energy from the strength of each character feeding off of the others, while Miller's scenes depend on Willy's force alone.

The opening scene in *Death of a Salesman* presents Willy, returning home late in the evening, carrying two heavy suitcases. For this scene, Miller's stage directions are numerous. The three-tiered set is crucial to the staging and must be carefully described, whereas O'Neill's set is merely a living room interior, a mere boundary of space for human action. Miller has a flute playing in the background during the opening: "it is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon" (11). The opening directions inform us only scantily about Willy, but they offer an entire overview of Linda that diminishes from the outset her possibilities as a character: "Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy's behavior" (12). She becomes a forceful presence of solicitous love, but she cannot then be a major force in the action. Their initial conversation sets a basic pattern for all scenes between Willy and her, though her love for Willy does enable Linda to blast her sons in later scenes when Willy is not present:

LINDA, *hearing Willy outside the bedroom, calls with some trepidation:*

Willy!

WILLY: It's all right. I came back.

LINDA: Why? What happened? *Slight pause.* Did something happen,

Willy?

WILLY: No, nothing happened.

LINDA: You didn't smash the car, did you?

WILLY, *with casual irritation*: I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me?

LINDA: Don't you feel well?

WILLY: I'm tired to the death. *The flute has faded away. He sits on the bed beside her, a little numb.* I couldn't make it, Linda.

LINDA, *very carefully, delicately*: Where were you all day? You look terrible.

WILLY: I got as far as a little above Yonkers. I stopped for a cup of coffee. Maybe it was the coffee.

LINDA: What?

WILLY, *after a pause*: I suddenly couldn't drive any more. The car kept going off onto the shoulder, y'know.

LINDA, *helpfully*: Oh. Maybe it was the steering again. I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker.

WILLY: No, it's me, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm--I can't seem to--keep my mind on it.

LINDA: Maybe it's your glasses. You never went for your new glasses.

WILLY: No, I see everything. I came back at ten miles an hour. It took

me nearly four hours from Yonkers.

LINDA, *resigned*: Well, you'll just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way.

WILLY: I just got back from Florida.

LINDA: But you didn't rest your mind. Your mind is overactive, and the mind is what counts, dear.

WILLY: I'll start out in the morning. Maybe I'll feel better in the morning. *She is taking off his shoes.* These goddam arch supports are killing me.

LINDA: Take an aspirin. Should I get you an aspirin? It'll soothe you.

WILLY, *with wonder*: I was driving along, you understand? And I was fine. I was even observing the scenery. You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life. But it's so beautiful up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me. And then all of a sudden I'm goin' off the road! I'm tellin' ya, I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I'd gone the other way over the white line I might've killed somebody. So I went on again--and five minutes later I'm dreamin' again, and I nearly--*He presses two fingers against his eyes.* I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts. (32)

Miller has staged this scene very carefully. Linda immediately makes Willy the center of our attention by asking him short, reasonable questions. His reaction from the start

shows how uncertain a grip he has on himself or on his whereabouts. Initially he pushes her questions away, suggesting that he wants no part of them. Her persistence elicits from him only a “casual irritation,” and immediately afterwards, he begins very gradually to tell Linda details of the day’s events, ending in his long speech that wavers between reverie that seems to forget she is present and an attempt to get both her and, more importantly, himself to understand. Miller has embedded the language with references to future happenings, including the three mentions of death or killing.

Each of Willy’s lines, however, has richer resonances. Initially he denies that anything happened, perhaps to quiet Linda, and perhaps to attempt believing himself that nothing happened. He cannot sustain these forced denials, and in saying twice “I couldn’t make it,” he signals a central thrust of the play: that he is, in some deeply truthful manner, “tired to the death.” The cliché takes on potent significance, as an insight into his condition of wanting to die. Even his account of his driving mishaps as some mysterious mental lapse doesn’t keep us from interpreting the actions it describes as a rehearsal for his eventual suicide. In fact, that suicide almost exactly recapitulates his earlier instance of his driving off the road toward the trees.

The scene dramatizes well how increasingly isolated Willy has become, even when ostensibly talking with Linda. She is only intermittently present to him throughout the scene. First, he tries to close down her questions; then he suddenly begins what would seem an intimate confession to her about his mental breakdown. Her response to his “I just couldn’t make it, Linda,” however, is to avoid the deeper implications of his words and to change the subject: “Where were you all day?” Her avoidance in turn

causes him to pull back from confession and throw out her kind of explanation: “I stopped for a cup of coffee. Maybe it was the coffee.” Her response of “What?” might be taken as an question about the antecedent of his “it” in “it was the coffee,” but when he plunges back into his confessional mode, “I suddenly couldn’t drive any more,” she characteristically avoids digging deeper into his words, and instead comes up with the simple answer that the problem might lie in the car’s steering.

Tension builds in the scene when he does hear her, and utterly rejects her kind of answer: “No, it’s me, it’s me. . . . I’m--I can’t seem to--keep my mind to it.” This moment is dramatically powerful, as Willy seems to be trying to drag her into entering the source of his dilemma--his disintegrating mind. She absolutely resists. She comes up with another mechanical explanation: “Maybe it’s your glasses.” Yet it is Linda who will not let herself see. Willy seems to recognize that fact finally. Its unavoidable consequence is that she cannot be there for him, that she will not hear his confession or offer any help of the sort he requires. He insists, back at her, that “No, I see everything.” Of course this assertion is meant only as a rejection of her mechanical explanations; on a deeper level, he cannot see at all. The entire opening scenes is replete with these vacillations in Willy: between recognizing the source of his troubles, and then rejecting his own flashes of insight. His internal vision cannot hold steady, and he is without any mooring. Linda has closed him off, finally uttering the platitude “the mind is what counts, dear,” without ever realizing how profoundly correct she is. Irony thus becomes Miller’s primary medium in the manipulation of dialogue, whereby each character reveals more truth than they can or want to recognize, and then constructs alternatives to that

truth--imaginary worlds and people, in Willy's case; in Linda's case, the small details of care, such as her offer to him of an aspirin. Not connecting with each other, however, is tragic for Willy, because his loneliness does not produce from him sustaining acts of love, but deeper withdrawals.

His long speech at the end of this scene is characteristic. The very mention of "scenery" produces a whimsical comment on his entire past life, that he was never much interested in scenery. Here, however, he veritably rhapsodizes about it: "But it's so beautiful up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm" (127). Such wistful language characterizes his reveries throughout the play, reveries in which he briefly withdraws from the present moment into the myth that some imagined garden or wilderness or wonder once existed. A similar passage of reverie suddenly erupts from Willy toward the end of the play, when he is again conversing with his imaginary brother, Ben:

WILLY: Oh, Ben, how do we get back to all the great times? Used to be full of light, and comradeship, the sleigh-riding in winter, and the ruddiness on his cheeks. And always some kind of good news coming up, always something nice coming up ahead. And never even let me carry the valises in the house, and simonizing, simonizing that little red car! Why, why can't I give him something and not have him hate me?
(127)

From the play's opening scene, then, to its closing, Willy can be counted on to slide into

moments of reverie very suddenly, and emerge from them just as quickly. Willy concludes his reverie about the wonders of nature with a statement that reveals more on examination than it does at first glance. He says, "I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me." Willy has slipped in time back to another car, where windshields could be lifted open. He thus begins to show himself capable of those very deep excursions into time past. Only the drama of his driving off the road pulls him back briefly into the present. When he concludes this long passage, Miller again gives him words of great resonance: "I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts." Once more, Willy confesses a profound truth about his mind's disintegration. He cannot act on this truth, and Linda, as always, will not help him out, but rather tries to drag him back into the world she wants him to remain a part of.

A page later in the opening scene, Willy and Linda begin discussing the return to home of Willy's favorite son, Biff. As Linda conveys the news to Willy that Happy had taken his brother out in the evening for a date, Willy slips completely out of focus:

LINDA: It was so nice to see them shaving together, one behind the other, in the bathroom. And going out together. You notice? The whole house smells of shaving lotion.

WILLY: Figure it out. Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it.

LINDA: Well, dear, life is a casting off. It's always that way. (47)

Linda, for once, feels some joy in having the whole family together again, the boys going

out together and the whole house smelling of shaving lotion. She wants Willy to notice this and simply feel the same pleasure she does, showing how far she was from listening to his words throughout the preceding three pages. Willy can't feel or think anything "simple" anymore; he is co-existing in so many conversations and time periods that he no longer has even the kernel of a core self. His wife has just asserted how good it feels to have the house full, which it is, and Willy responds by wondering what's the use of owning a house when "there's nobody to live in it." Linda again contrives to ignore Willy's blatant contradiction of her report, and instead offers another of those shopworn platitudes that she repeatedly tries to deploy as vehicles for calming down Willy: "Life is a casting off. It's always that way" (47). The idea behind the comment is stoical, a position of detachment from the world, absolutely unavailable to Willy or to Linda. She can never be stoical because of her need to constantly try to calm down Willy; he can never be stoical because his internal life is a chamber of dissonances and confusions that leave him feeling always disoriented. A few lines later, Miller sets up an exchange between Willy and Linda that reveals a recurrent problem in his language: a character will drop out of idiomatic speech into a literary, or intellectual, phrasing, radically distorting the realism Miller wants to attain:

WILLY, *worried and angered*: There's such an undercurrent in him. He became a moody man. Did he apologize when I left this morning?

LINDA: He was crestfallen, Willy. You know how he admires you. I

think if he finds himself, then you'll both be happier and not fight

anymore. (15-16)

Surely it is completely out of character for Willy to employ such a subtle, analytical term, as “undercurrent.” Plausibly, Willy can say that Biff has become “moody,” but it is ridiculous to believe that he would catch, much less employ, any “undercurrent.”

Likewise, Linda’s use of “crestfallen” is simply too literary for a very practical down-to-earth woman, a woman who offers aspirin to a man who’s told her that his mind is out of control; it is not for this woman to make use of a nineteenth-century literary word like “crestfallen.” The failing with Linda is less serious because she remains such a static character; Willy, on the other hand, is suffering a rapid mental disintegration with which Miller wants us to empathize. Empathy is withheld when Willy suddenly talks as if he were a man in full possession with his mental faculties. The dramatic power of the exchange is significantly diminished. Stanley Kauffmann makes the point rather forcefully:

But often the dialogue slips into a fanciness that is slightly ludicrous. To hear Biff say, “I’ve been remiss,” to hear Linda say, “He was crestfallen, Willy” is like watching a car run off the road momentarily onto the shoulder. (I’ve never heard anyone use the word “crestfallen” in my life.) Then there is the language of Billy’s brother Ben, the apparition of piratical success. He speaks like nothing but a symbol, and not a symbol connected with Willy in any perceptible way. Miller *says* he’s Willy’s brother, that’s all. The very use of diamonds as the source of Ben’s wealth has an almost childishly symbolic quality about it. When Miller’s language is close to the stenographic, the remembered, it’s good; otherwise, it tends to literary juvenility, a pretended return from pretended experience. (107)

One further problem with such lapses in language further weakens the audience’s ability to experience Willy directly. Some of the pretentious diction given to characters to speak is also a means by which Miller hopes to instruct the audience about the meaning of what

he should be getting them to feel. Miller wants us to notice that there is an “undercurrent” in Biff; Miller wants us to recognize that Biff is “very lost.” Such regrettable didacticism diminishes the power of the two sons and Linda even more than the staging; and when it comes from Willy, it undercuts the pathos towards which Miller is driving us. Perhaps the most unbelievable instance of such a didactic use of character comes at the end of the play when Biff tells off his father. The stage direction for this speech gives us one Biff: “*In his fury, Biff seems on the verge of attacking his father*” The direction sets us up for an outburst of the sort O’Neill constantly stages with such power. The words, however, that come out of Biff’s mouth completely subvert the stage directions and seem like a formulated speech designed by another Biff to deliver a balanced and final judgment: “I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!” (132) Instead of rage, Biff becomes a delivery system for Miller’s metaphor for a “hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can.”

Linda’s one great moment of truth-telling comes when she attempts to mediate the attacks on Willy by his sons:

BIFF, *starting to go out after Willy*: What the hell is the matter with him?

Happy stops him.

LINDA: Don’t--don’t go near him!

BIFF: Stop making excuses for him! He always, always wiped the floor with you. Never had an ounce of respect for you.

HAPPY: He always had respect for--

BIFF: What the hell do you know about it?

HAPPY, *surlily*: Just don't call him crazy!

BIFF: He's got no character--Charley wouldn't do this. Not in his own House--spewing out that vomit from his mind.

HAPPY: Charley never had to cope with what he's got to.

BIFF: People are worse off than Willy Loman. Believe me, I've seen them!

LINDA: Then make Charley your father, Biff. You can't do that, can you? I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. You called him crazy--

BIFF: I didn't mean--

LINDA: No, a lot of people think he's lost his--balance. But you don't have to be very smart to know what his trouble is. The man is exhausted.

HAPPY: Sure!

LINDA: A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his

salary away.

HAPPY, *indignantly*: I didn't know that, Mom. (55-56)

Linda's moment comes in a substantial speech that has become justly renowned. Miller's language does not fail him for this occasion. Her insistent assertion that "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" is forceful and true. Unfortunately, while Linda now recognizes Willy's deep-seated need, she is still unable to supply it, or even admit it. She offers aspirins, platitudes, and whatever other kind of caring gestures available to her; but she doesn't grasp, cannot allow herself to grasp, the depth of Willy's dilemma. Her speech comes just after Biff has been calling his father "crazy." Again, Miller works the staging to create rich irony. Biff's anger at Willy is surely no solution at all, yet his diagnosis of Willy's craziness is absolutely correct. Linda is accurate in rebuking Biff's anger and asking for "attention" instead. But the word "attention" means to take care of, and that requires knowledge about what's wrong. Linda is still caught in denying that Willy is crazy and instead believes that he is merely "exhausted." She drifts backward with her denial of his insanity into becoming a didactic mouthpiece for the author when she says, "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man" (56). This statement leaps high to a level of abstraction beyond her ordinary domain of fact, and emerges as an aphorism.

Linda has never been permitted to engage dramatically with Willy, from the beginning of the play to its end. In some sense, her diminished role parallels that of the two sons, particularly Biff, who is increasingly antagonistic and judgmental to his father even though he is supposedly completely "lost." The pattern of staging described in detail

for the opening scene repeats itself throughout the entire play: Linda's denials and comforts, Biff's aggressiveness, and Happy's escapism--all swirling around Willy as he explodes into a cycle of moods that repeats itself: denial, confession, mental confusion, reverie, simultaneous multiple conversations, and fits of anger. His disintegration has got to be the center for the play's pathos, a center for whose sake Miller sacrifices possible depth in all his other characters; if they had more depth and imagination, they would have had to intervene more forcefully into Willy's situation, and might have lessened the loneliness and pain of his outcome.

O'Neill constructs a very similar scene in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, designed to give the mother a moment of truth-telling in rebuke of her two sons and their critical behavior toward their father. A look at this scene will help us understand why O'Neill can achieve a fullness of characterization for all of his family members, whereas Miller must sacrifice three of them to bring adequate pathos to Willy. Mary asks her sons, "Where is your father? (60). She wants him for lunch. She is attempting to bring normality back to her day, just as Linda was. Edmund only slightly jabs at his father, saying, "Gabbing with old Captain Turner, Jamie says. He'll be late, as usual" (22). Jamie then looks out of the window to confirm Edmund's assertion and sees that the cook, Cathleen, has gone down to the gate to get James. He reports that, "She's down there now." Then the stage direction instructs Jamie to speak "*sneeringly*." His words mock his father's melodramatic, theatrical verbal posturings: "Interrupting the famous Beautiful Voice! She should have more respect" (23). This comment triggers one of Mary's moments of grace, whereby she hits on a truth very close to what Linda tells her

sons:

MARY: *Sharply--letting her resentment toward him come out.* It's you who should have more respect! Stop sneering at your father! I won't have it! You ought to be proud you're his son! He may have his faults. Who hasn't? But he's worked hard all his life. He made his way up from ignorance and poverty to the top of his profession! Everyone else admires him and you should be the last one to sneer--you, who, thanks to him, have never had to work hard in your life! *Stung, Jamie has turned to stare at her with accusing antagonism. Her eyes waver guiltily and she adds in a tone which begins to placate.* Remember your father is getting old, Jamie. You really ought to show more consideration. (26)

To begin with, Mary's speech accomplishes multiple aims in the play: first, it levels a just criticism at Edmund and especially Jamie, who are too given to sneering; second, the stage direction reveals a secondary motive behind this speech in Mary's resentment toward Jamie's constant suspicion of her, so that his behavior toward his father is to some degree and excuse to permit her to lash out at him; and third, the speech closes with an apparent appeal for extra consideration owed to the elderly, and this, of course, is actually a plea to Jamie to understand why her worries for Edmund have driven her back to the morphine. Thus O'Neill manages to make dramatically affective a just action as well as deepen Mary's character. Linda cannot be allowed by Miller to become a deep character; O'Neill must have each of his characters deepen in order that the others might be deepened as well. Mary's simultaneous rebuke of, and appeal to, Jamie suddenly give

way to the same oscillation of mood that Willy undergoes; indeed, the stage direction points to “*a strange, abrupt change to a detached, impersonal tone*” (61). She says, in the tone of philosophical acceptance:

But I suppose life has made him like that, and he can't help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever. (61)

Mary might seem to be guilty here of the charges brought against Miller's characters when they speak in generalizing, aphoristic phrases. O'Neill, however, can justify the phrasing as realistic by letting us see that Mary has actually slid into a state of reverie, which her morphine addiction has begun to bring out; moreover, what she says in generalizations is actually, underneath, a plea to her sons to recognize what in fact has happened to her. In some sense, also, she has abstracted herself from the scene and is talking to herself, using phrases that recur throughout the play, most particularly in the extended closing scene. Harold Bloom has complained that O'Neill's language is “banal” and unmemorable (5-6). I do not find it so; in both Mary's rebuke of her sons, and in her generalizing reverie, her language is distilled, precise, straightforward, and unadorned by any slips in diction. The entire scene furthers the momentum in the play, whereby one character's abrupt changes in tone or mood destabilize the scene, permitting an ever-new beginning of yet another scene.

Near the beginning of the second act of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Eugene O'Neill dramatizes the re-gathering of the four Tyrones--the mother, father, and two brothers--for lunch, just after the three men had finished outdoor yard work. In the

living room, present through every scene in the play, stands a bottle of whiskey on a tray with glasses and a small pitcher of iced water; recurrently, the bottle of whiskey will function as a prompt for multiple interpretations in a scene and thereby take on a symbolic role.

EDMUND: *Dully*. Did I hear you say let's all have drinks?

TYRONE: *Frowns at him*. Jamie is welcome after his hard morning's work, but I won't invite you. Doctor Hardy--

EDMUND: To hell with Doctor Hardy! One isn't going to kill me. I Feel--all in, Papa.

TYRONE: *With a worried look at him--putting on a fake heartiness*.

Come along, then. It's before a meal and I've always found that good whiskey, taken in moderation as an appetizer, is the best of tonics.

Edmund gets up as his father passes the bottle to him. He pours a big drink. Tyrone frowns admonishingly. I said, in moderation. He pours his own drink and passes the bottle to Jamie, grumbling. It'd be a waste of breath mentioning moderation to you. Ignoring the hint, Jamie pours a big drink. His father scowls--then, giving it up, resumes his hearty air, raising his glass. Well, here's health and happiness! (65-66)

It is un-typical for James Tyrone to offer drinks, which is why Edmund questions “*Dully*,” or mockingly, if he heard correctly. However, Tyrone’s frown indicates genuine concern for Edmund’s poor health, which is later found to be consumption; it is also clear that Edmund desperately needs the drink (“I feel--all in”), a condition to which the entire

family can relate. The following stage direction demonstrates perfectly how the dynamic of interaction between the family members operates: “*With a worried look at him-- putting on a fake heartiness*”; the dash balances in equal unity Tyrone’s inward feeling and outward action, his genuine concern and the facade he demonstrates. This prompts him to lapse into his actor-self, to speak with grandeur--and with appropriately grand generalizations; that he uses simplifications makes clear the fact that there are no real “tonics” for the problems the Tyrone family must face, and to believe so is only a fake; the “*big drink*” Edmund pours is truth enough for this, but he is only doing what the others do, or want to do, which is self-medicate.

The facade is quickly destroyed, and Tyrone makes a scathing and “*grumbling*” comment to Jamie; a part of him is able to relate to why Jamie needs a big drink as well, but his stinginess gets the best of him and so reacts bitterly; then, just as quickly, he retracts, and “*resumes his hearty air.*” Both the “health” (considering Edmund’s and Mary’s conditions) and the “happiness” Tyrone drinks to are also facades. Tyrone’s projections are made all the more unbelievable as all three men await eagerly to gulp their drinks, to dull both the truth of their lives and the fakeness--both are equally causes of resentment.

This brief interaction is characteristic of all the interactions from the opening to the close of the play. Not only does each character possess a capacity to constantly offer up these facades that would deny some vital part of what they know and feel, but each character continues to be able to withdraw this facade with lightning speed and replace it with an assertion of self-blame, a recrimination against the other, or a powerful

expression of pain. The rapidity of these assertions, and then their immediately successive reversals by a single speaker, demonstrates what Richard Sewall has emphasized as the astonishing “stamina” of these characters (104). The play holds its audience even though nothing of any genuine significance seems to occur. What, therefore, accounts for the play’s capacity to grasp and sustain an audience’s attention through an endless sequence of repetitive assertions and self-denials, love and hate?

Compared to the ceaselessly self-contradicting characters in this play, Arthur Miller’s characters come across as static and fixed into long-established positions of relative stasis. To add emotional variation to his play, therefore, Miller must resort to one of two strategies: either increase the volume with which a character speaks, or extend the speech into a lengthy outpouring. Moreover, Miller indulges in a tendency to load these lengthened outpourings with the intellectual cues designed to make certain his audience grasps the themes of his play. By comparison, O’Neill undertakes a project in which no themes are put into the mouths of his characters that the audience can accept as didactic; every character, through their ceaseless self-contradictions, becomes unreliable as a vehicle for thematic assertion. O’Neill seems, instead, bent on portraying a family as a social organism in which individuality is composed of a life history of primary interactions with other members of the family in such a manner that no character is free from having been decisively shaped by all the other characters, and yet is also a participant in the shaping of all those other characters. The mutuality of self-development manifests itself when the family is put under extreme pressure of events: Edmund’s increasingly evident illness that can no longer be dismissed as a summer cold, but must

be faced as consumption; Mary's return to morphine following two months of remission; and the alcoholism of both Jamie and his father.

As observed in the scene above, taking a drink can indeed be a social act whereby everyone relaxes; but as James Tyrone says, it's a "tonic," without fully recognizing that a tonic is something which restores. For this family, to be restored is to have their stamina recharged so that each of them can attack the others, her or himself, or both, in rapid succession.

O'Neill's singular genius lies in his capacity to make every exchange in the first scenes of the play full of the same ambiguities that continue re-surfacing in the final scene of the play. In doing so, however, he avoids any perceivable pattern, and therefore each exchange seems to be different from every other one; and in some ways it is, while at the same time remaining identical to the other ones at some level of meaning. Very near the play's opening this characteristic, and yet distinctively individual, exchange among the entire quartet of characters takes place:

MARY: *Turns smilingly to them, in a merry tone that is a bit forced.* I've been kidding your father about his snoring. *To Tyrone.* I'll leave it to the boys, James. They must have heard you. No, not you, Jamie. I could hear you down the hall almost as bad as your father. You're like him. As soon as your head touches the pillow you're off and ten foghorns couldn't wake you. *She stops abruptly, catching Jamie's regarding her with an uneasy, probing look. Her smile vanishes and her manner becomes self-conscious.* Why are you staring, Jamie? *Her hands*

flutter up to her hair. Is my hair coming down? It's hard for me to do it up properly now. My eyes are getting so bad and I never can find my glasses.

JAMIE: *Looks away guiltily.* Your hair's alright, Mama. I was only thinking how well you look.

TYRONE: *Heartily.* Just what I've been telling her, Jamie. She's so fat and sassy, there'll soon be no holding her.

EDMUND: Yes, you certainly look grand, Mama. *She is reassured and smiles at him lovingly. He winks with a kidding grin.* I'll back you up about Papa's snoring. Gosh, what a racket!

JAMIE: I heard him, too. *He quotes, putting on a ham-actor manner.* "The Moor, I know his trumpet." *His mother and brother laugh.*

TYRONE: *Scathingly.* If it takes my snoring to make you remember Shakespeare instead of the dope sheet on the ponies, I hope I'll keep on with it.

MARY: Now, James! You mustn't be so touchy. *Jamie shrugs his shoulders and sits down in the chair on her right.*

EDMUND: *Irritably.* Yes, for Pete's sake, Papa! The first thing after breakfast! Give it a rest, can't you? *He slumps down in the chair at left of table next to his brother. His father ignores him.*

MARY: *Reprovingly.* Your father wasn't finding fault with you. You Don't have to always take Jamie's part. You'd think you were the one

ten years older.

JAMIE: *Boredly*. What's all the fuss about? Let's forget it.

TYRONE: *Contemptuously*. Yes, forget! Forget everything and face nothing! It's a convenient philosophy if you've no ambition in life except to--

MARY: James, do be quiet. (31)

O'Neill's plotting and staging of this quartet is meticulous. For a reader, the stage directions, and for an audience, brilliant acting, help illuminate his art. Mary's tone is said to be "*merry*," but also "*a bit forced*." The contradiction reflects the ambivalence of her feelings, her plans, and her concern for the family. The preceding night, dense in fog as the upcoming night will turn out to be, echoed through the house with a haunting foghorn. Mary, awakened, went out into the hall, stopped to listen at Jamie's door, and then grew concerned by the persistent heavy coughing coming through Edmund's door. She went into the spare room. The reason she wants to offer for moving into the spare room is the loud snoring of Tyrone, but both her sons were awake, heard her moving about and then end up in the spare room.

The previous night, it turns out, is not only the previous night, but is the recurring ghost of countless hundreds of other nights when Mary would slip into the spare room to inject herself with some of the morphine she had hidden there. Thus the spare room itself is a part of the living history in the family, and its very mention is sufficient to bring back the memories of all her nights of narcotic wandering. Both sons are therefore already thinking of her past history and consequently cannot accept fully

any explanation she offers for moving into the spare room--even though both of them desperately want to believe in any other explanation than it's having been a recurrence of the past. They want her back; they want to save her; and they have wanted both of these things so many times in the past, seemed to be getting them, and then in the end turned out to be fooled. Some living part of each son will always be suspicious of her, angry at himself for having such suspicions, resentful of her for provoking such suspicions, and yet still caring about her. So many divided impulses inside a single person of great stamina cannot even possibly achieve a lasting peace or harmony. The energy and suspense, scene by scene in the play, comes from a waiting, an outburst of these emotional currents. We never know which one is likely to sound forth, but we can know that inevitably the other three currents, feeling neglected, will fight at each other until one of them pushes outward into expression. This accounts for the rapid alterations of mood and assertion, of self-cancellation, that each character seems constantly to be enacting.

Mary's comment, both "*merry and a bit forced*," invokes the famously loud snoring of Tyrone. The problem here is that she comes across offering an explanation for her movements before anyone actually brought up the subject, and therefore ironically puts the subject center stage. She wants this facade to work, so she immediately calls upon the two boys to provide supporting evidence for her. In the midst of calling on them, it is as if she suddenly realizes that Jamie is unlikely to be a possible witness since he had been heard snoring as loudly as his father. She then says, "You're like him." The comment, in context, might seem innocent and even worthy of a smile; in the context of the whole play, however, the comment carries an undertone of a far deeper indictment of

blame which Mary is ready to place on any or all of the men in the family as justifying causes for her addiction: on Tyrone's stinginess over doctors; on Jamie's drinking, whoring, and failure to find a fulfilling job, which makes her both angry and worried; and at Edmund's health, which has always been frail, which frightens her of another resurgence of the past, the consumption that wasted to death her own father. O'Neill allows us to infer that Jamie may have caught some of this overtone, because in trying to make a joke of his snoring, she catches Jamie's eye watching her "*with an uneasy probing look.*" This look makes her immediately "*self-conscious*" for two reasons: first, being aware that she got up for an injection of morphine, she knows she has been trying to pass off yet one more lie to deflect suspicion, and Jamie's look tells her that it's not working; second, his look echoes a thousand other suspicious looks that all the members of the family have given her, as she knows, rightly. In consequence, this single speech and Jamie's reaction bring forth the constant double action of the play, whereby the ambivalence of immediate events is further complicated by the constant memory of earlier similar events which are repeating themselves. In this manner, O'Neill makes the past part of present time in his play, suggesting that for this family it is not the past which is a ghost, but the family

members themselves who are ghosts, eternally reenacting a sequence of primal acts of violence towards each other.

Mary's self-consciousness immediately tries to assault the suspicion she detects in Jamie when she says, "Why are you staring, Jamie?" Significantly, O'Neill's stage direction has Mary's hands flutter up to her hair in that dance of hand motion that is a signature of Mary's presence throughout the play. The fluttering up is clearly a sign of her nervousness at suspicion, yet, as self-conscious as she now is, she suddenly needs an explanation for why her hands have nervously fluttered. Characteristically she attempts to deflect again. Her speech is potentially pertinent to the specific situation, but also redolent with the encroaching presence of the past. She says, "Is my hair coming down? It's hard for me to do it up properly now. My eyes are getting so bad . . ." The question would deflect any further doubt about why her hands were fluttering. Her elaboration after the question becomes an instance of a habit which characterizes all the speech of the characters: its seamless slides into a state of reverie about the lost past, about lost possibilities and hence evocative of regret, self-pity, and remorse. Simply the word "now" after "properly" shows her mind moving back to a time when her hair was always beautifully cared-for, her hands artfully capable of attending to every detail of her appearance; likewise "My eyes are getting so bad" reflects a state of lament over her lost youth, an intensification of her self-pity, and finally an attempt to play on the emotional bonds with Jamie by eliciting pity from him.

It works, for a time. The stage direction has Jamie looking away guiltily. He throws up a facade, like all the characters do so readily, being as it is a lifelong

requirement of membership in this family, designed to calm the situation: “Your hairs alright, Mama. I was only thinking how well you look” (25). This seems to the other two men a promising strategy, and their comments immediately following piggy-back onto Jamies. Tyrone affirms that he had been telling her the very same thing about her appearance minutes before; and Edmund follows, “You certainly look grand, Mama” (25).

This moment is one of the special moments of grace that O’Neill provides in the play, whereby all three of the four family members harmonize in a facade designed to offer acceptance and love toward the fourth family member. It is a moment of acceptance and understanding for which all four are grateful, a moment which foreshadows others throughout the play, culminating in the very final scene, where a measure of peace is achieved among the four. But O’Neill’s moments of grace are not like those attributed to God by his one-time Catholicism; there is no promise of redemption or resurrection, no eternal peace. Nonetheless, these moments of grace in O’Neill’s world, as perhaps in our own world, are the greatest moments that we ever achieve, and so we should be grateful for their clarity and peace. The ensemble action of the three men does its work and Mary “*is reassured and smiles at him lovingly. He winks with a kidding grin.*” Edmund then does his best to stretch out this moment of love and offers himself, in an almost Christ-like fashion, as a witness to the fact that Mary threw out as the excuse for her move to the spare room. As if also aware of his father’s actor’s vanity, he deliberately tries to phrase his description of the snoring: “Gosh, what a racket!” (24). Then, Jamie also attempts to extend the duration of this moment of grace by backing up Edmund. First, his support is

simple, “I heard him, too” (24). At this instant, however, something else in Jamie bursts out of him. Perhaps the lighthearted joking about his father’s snoring simply can’t sit with that part of him that hates his father, that blames his father, for Mary’s addiction, and for his own sellout to commercial success. The stage direction sets us up: “*He quotes, putting on a ham-actor manner.*” He says, ““The Moor, I know his trumpet”” (25). As if trying to keep things light, Mary and Edmund both laugh. It could be taken as just a joke.

Tyrone’s intense, scathing reaction, however, signals that he must be responding to one of the buried layers in the manner of Jamie’s words and delivery. Tyrone has heard all too often the cynical, sardonic put-downs of his miserliness and his sell-out to commercialism. His skin is so thin here that he cannot contribute to the moment of grace by overlooking the resonance of Jamie’s history of critical comments and take this particular utterance at just its face value, designed to serve the goodness of this moment. Just as Mary is constantly alert to any sign of suspicion from the others, so James Tyrone is also alert to any sign of their derogation of those weaknesses which he has long been attacked for by his sons and which he knows absolutely to be true of his own life. By interpreting Jamie as mocking him, Tyrone avoids having to face the truth of what he takes to be Jamie’s meaning. Brooding on that truth, as he does in the final act of the play, reveals how present is his shame, his self-disgust, and his inability to let go of the old familiar justifications for them. Tyrone snaps out an attack on Jamie’s weakness for betting on the horses and his failure to succeed in an acting career--preferably as a Shakespearean actor whereby the first son might have fulfilled the promise abandoned by the father, and thus atoned for the father’s weaknesses, but this son, Jamie, has failed the

father in the father's eyes. There is so much depth of feeling in his snapped-out reply at Jamie that the layers of meaning only become clear after repeated readings.

The most remarkable moment in this period of grace is the clarity and presence of mind of Mary's intervention. The normal pattern in this family would have been for Tyrone's scathing response to Jamie to have ignited a counter-attack from Jamie that would have mushroomed into a major blood-letting. Minutes before, Mary had been defensive and guilty with reason, on the verge of coming apart, but the action of the three men in harmonizing together for her sake seems to bring about for Mary another one of those moments that occur in the play as if magically. Her nervousness disappears, along with her self-consciousness and her guilt, and her need for more morphine. She takes the helm and valiantly attempts to hold together the harmony, not by invoking another facade but by an astonishingly clear-eyed recognition of the reality of the present moment and a discounting of any need to be influenced by the past and its resonances. She occupies the middle-ground as a peacemaker in very simple and utterly truthful statements. She turns to her husband and tells him firmly but gently, before he can continue attacking Jamie and before Jamie can mount the counter-attack, saying with calm common sense, "Now, James! You mustn't be so touchy" (30). Edmund erupts at his father, and again Mary immediately enters with plain common sense and directly addresses him, "Your father wasn't finding fault with you" (30). She thereby calms Edmund down, and like his father he sits. Jamie, whom we would expect to be bursting with a planned counter-attack on his father, intervenes and starts to speak, only to be interrupted again by Tyrone, who delivers a complete denunciation of Jamie: "Forget everything and face nothing! It's a

convenient philosophy if you've no ambition in life . . ." (31). But Mary again comes in as the active peace-maker and says, firmly, "James, do be quiet" (31). She suggests that he must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed that morning, and turns to the boys in order to take the conversation out any remaining tension.

Again, in a very clear-headed fashion, she recalls exactly that the boys were laughing at something when they emerged from the breakfast room and invites them to share the joke with everyone. Her plan works. The boys launch into a re-telling of the funny story about the pigs in the millionaire Harker's estate. The story has everyone laughing, and Mary has succeeded, to the surprise of most audience members and readers, in devoting herself completely to the facts of the present situation, acting decisively to head off tensions for as long as possible. Of course, this won't be very long. Nevertheless, we need always to recall both how this action of Mary's could sustain peace and harmony among the four members of the family, and also honesty and clear-thinking, if it could be always functioning in everyone, might succeed. Of course in suggesting that if only Mary could have acted like this all through her life, things would have been better, is a fantasy that O'Neill will not indulge. No person has such control over her or his life, moment to moment; anyone who thinks that is a monstrous egoist.

What conclusions can be drawn together to summarize this contrastive analysis? O'Neill stages his play in a straightforward, realistic manner. The sixteen hours of the day move by inexorably; the characters are grouped in pairs, or as an ensemble, or only occasionally alone. None of them moves back and forth into private, enclosed realities for very long, because the force of the other characters being present immediately pulls them back to the moment at hand with an almost ferocious intensity. As Richard Sewall noted, all the Tyrones exhibit an astonishing "stamina" as they "survive hour after hour of the often furious exchange of blame and counter blame" (104-105).

Miller's staging is outwardly much more adventurous, replete with sudden flash-backs wherein the characters become their earlier selves for a short scene, providing background and family history. Willy alone cannot remain fixed in present-time dialogues because of his mind's continuous engagement with distinct and simultaneous lines of thought and conversation. His interior dialogues regularly burst out into and interrupt present-time dialogues, as if to demonstrate their parallel and un-ending existence. Opening the play-text at random, a reader would have difficulty locating what historical time period the characters are in--and this is true especially of Willy's conversations. The overall result dramatizes the disintegration of Willy's mind and self, whereby the other family members become increasingly reduced into roles as competing members of the crowded and confused world of Willy's interior consciousness. Such staging magnifies Willy's role in the play, dispersing concentrated focus on actual interchanges in real time and thereby subordinating the other family members. This never

occurs in O'Neill, where the four family members consistently jolt each other into forceful engagement in the here-and-now. Miller's method of staging compels the subordinate characters to adopt didactic postures, as if they are observers instead of participants in the scene, constantly asserting attitudes to or about Willy. The loss for Miller comes in reducing his claims to realism, since we can never fully enter the lives of the other characters sufficiently to give them any depth. Willy, on the other hand, emerges in compassionate, terrifying significance. The critical dilemma occurs because Willy ought to carry the thematic weight in the play, but he does not. Miller, with his dominant character trapped in a disintegrating self, is forced to explain him through the words of other characters.

For these reasons, Miller's play resolves itself in dramatic action, Willy's suicide, leaving unresolved the future of his family and the causes of his demise. In contrast, O'Neill's play ends in the midst of the family's collective, ongoing experiences, so intense that its perpetuation is more terrifying than Willy's death. They will go on, will have to go on, feeding off of each other.

Another notable contrast between the two play-texts is the degree of stage directions. O'Neill's are omnipresent and thick, becoming almost a fifth major participant in the play-text; this allows a reader to envision the scene as it might be performed. His stage directions reveal an amazingly subtle deployment of body-language, facial expression, and the multiple nuances of words said out loud. Miller, by contrast, is terse and sparing in his use of stage directions. The characters seem freer to interpret their lines, but this also seems to have forced Miller to put the emotional weight into the words

and situations themselves. Sometimes this seems sufficient, but often it requires the assistance of dialogue, from Willy's imaginary characters, to offer in their words, rather didactically, the deeper meanings that O'Neill used his stage directions to impart to the actors. Miller tries hard to compensate for this intrusive authorial voice in the mouths of his subordinate characters, but too often Linda or Biff—not even to mention Ben—are obliged to explain in generalizations the meaning of what is happening. The loss is one of comparative intensity. Each O'Neill character suffers in making her or his speeches, whereas Miller's characters often seem to disperse emotion by lapsing into platitudes or generalization. Linda, for example, is forced to carry the weight of deep insight, a posture wholly inconsistent with the fretful life she has supposedly led. Biff seems uncomfortable in his addresses to the audience, since his character seems mired in hopeless confusions.

Ultimately, the critical fortunes of *Death of a Salesman* have fallen so drastically because Miller pays such an enormous price to keep Willy in the spotlight. As Willy increasingly diminishes into insanity, the other characters, so dependent on him for their reactions, likewise diminish into stereotypes of themselves.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the Preface to his first book, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts a trenchant vision of tragedy:

Oedipus did not want to marry his mother nor kill his father but he did it and what he did stands as a crime. The whole of Greek tragedy assumes this idea of an essential contingency through which we are all guilty and all innocent because we do not know what we are doing. Hegel has admirably expressed the impartiality of the hero who can see well that his adversaries are not necessarily 'wretches,' everyone being right in a sense, and accomplishes his task without hoping for everyone's approval, nor his own entirely. The myth of the sorcerer's apprentice is another of those obsessive images in which from time to time the West expresses its terror of being overwhelmed by nature and history. (xxxix)

By this standard, Willy Loman cannot be considered a tragic hero. He is a common, middle-class American whose mind disintegrates under the pressure of un-specified, but, nevertheless, enormous forces. His isolation and suffering surely suffice to elicit an uncommon measure of pathos from any audience. His death can be termed "tragic" only in the more generalized sense developed by Unamuno: the contingencies of his life crush him, making him both equally guilty and innocent, equally deserving and undeserving of his fate. He fully embodies the "tragic sense of life."

The critical fortunes of *Death of a Salesman*, however, have undeniably undergone steady devaluation. To a large degree, Miller must bear the responsibility. The

materials were there in his hands for a great play. Where, we ask, did he betray those materials?

In large measure, Miller never clarifies the reasons for Willy's demise. One possible explanation of that demise reveals Willy as a man who, from the beginning, suffered from believing too much in myths about America that had never been true. An intellectual error, an instance of "hamartia," or a symptom of an individual's pathology? Miller does not clarify this matter for us. Willy certainly exhibits symptoms of a man who can never be satisfied. If we ascribe that fact to antagonistic pressures in American social and economic life, then Willy becomes a victim. Aside from some generalizing platitudes scattered in the play, however, what in the play's structure could possibly be taken as authorization for this view point? Willy might very well always have been what Stanley Kauffmann suggests: "not . . . a man brought down by various failures but . . . a mentally unstable man in whom the fissures have increased" (143). Why should we believe that Willy was ever functionally able to cope with external reality, ever dependable and reasonable? The play presents him, from its outset, as enduring tenuously in a late stage of mental disintegration. His pathology may have been present from childhood.

Miller either will not or cannot clearly condemn social forces for what happens to Willy. After all, Willy has paid off his mortgage, owns his car, and winds up in a neighborhood of increasingly valuable real estate. The new apartments he bemoans are actually signs of a revitalization of economic worth in his neighborhood. Why isn't a man in this position deserving of being called a success? Willy himself dies in an act that

endorses his high evaluation of the importance of money: the life insurance will take care of Linda, and the play seems to endorse the power of money and accept it as a consolation. Nowhere does Miller attack the value of money; if anything, he aggrandizes its significance.

An audience, of course, could supply what Miller fails to present clearly: an indictment of American materialism. Yet somehow the play asks us to believe that Biff tumbles into his lostness merely from witnessing a single act of Willy's surrender to his loneliness by means of a woman in a one-night stand. Is this even plausibly sufficient cause for Biff's subsequent eighteen years of remaining lost, unable to find himself? Both Biff and Willy suffer from the consequences of an unexplained hero-worship of each other. Miller shows no reason why either character needs a hero. Of course, it could be argued, the audience is free to fill in the blanks left by Miller and place the blame on some generalized vision of the collapse of American culture. The play, however, fails to dramatize such a vision as an active antagonist to Willy and Biff.

These thematic confusions exist in the play and need to be acknowledged. The more questions we ask of the play itself, the fewer satisfactory answers it supplies. This failure in no way reduces the pathos we witness as Willy disintegrates. His commanding image will haunt any sensitive viewer. Nonetheless, we are left doubting the overall thematic coherence of the play's structure. Willy's family remain in memory as wholly ineffectual. If Willy is "crazy," why does no one in the play forcefully intervene to get him medical help?

Perhaps this last question is its own answer. No one does intervene. Willy is left alone, solitary, and untended. If Biff actually sees his father as being crazy, then Biff must carry the heaviest responsibility for failing to get his father medical help. Of course Biff is presented as being so muddled, by his own repeated admission, that he remains as paralyzed as we are in the face of the spectacle of a disintegrating Willy.

In the end, the play depends too much on whatever grace an audience is willing to grant it. Today, with its critical fortunes sunk to a very low level, we might conclude that our audiences have grown too callous to supply any grace at all.

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