

**Arthur Miller's exploration of the ramifications of determinism and free will,  
guilt and responsibility as a notable playwright of ideas and liberal  
Humanism: An Appraisal**

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**An Abstract**

This paper is structured with the motive of balancing the social and psychological concerns of man with references to the works of Arthur Miller. This paper lays focus on the responsibilities of man and his commitment to his responsibilities by drawing attention from Miller's special characters that project the day-to-day plights of human life. The exposition of everyday realities, responsibilities, and moral ideas makes him an intellectual playwright. Bringing home the point, Miller's works proves that his choice of strong natural characters proves himself as a notable playwright.

**Key Words:** Liberal imagination, Absurdity,  
Self-examination, determinism and free will, guilt and  
responsibility, drift and action

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Arthur Miller is a notable modern American playwright whose plays do significantly point to his firm adherence to the theatre of ideas. No doubt, he is an artist with substantial gifts and real concerns for ideas and almost all his plays are nothing but products of the liberal imagination. Usually regarded as an intellectual dramatist, his plays express moral, social and political ideas. Falling in line with E.M.Forster or Aldous Huxley as novelists of ideas, Miller is considered rather undoubtedly the dramatist of ideas. Always his work entertains change and development by all means for he does propound a drama that for all of its concern with the inner life which is substantial, addresses itself to 'the world beyond the skin'. This is not a call for thesis drama, but a search for a balance between the

social and the psychological, the outer and inner concerns of man. Miller himself stated once thus:

“I am not calling for ideology ... I am simply for a theatre in which an adult who wants to live can find plays that will heighten his awareness of what living in our time involves” (66)

He further said:

“Society is inside of man and man is inside of society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychologically entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and prevent him from being what he is. The fish is in the water and the water is in the fish” (39).

This intense commitment to moving beyond the closed ego is linked to an equally firm belief in man's ability to exercise responsibility. Miller no longer denies the absurdity and existential loneliness of the human condition. *The Misfits*, *After the Fall Incident at Vichy* and *The Price* are cogent and painful testaments to its anguish. Even though his plays do increasingly dramatize the absurdist element in human experience, Miller is never content with simply defining absurdity or chronicling its manifestations. Miller can recognize despair but he cannot embrace it into a cult. For him, the drama must move further and reach higher thereby exploring the possibilities of the engaged man who has sought to live actively in the knowledge of his own absurdity.

In *After the Fall*, the main focus is almost personal. The play is nothing but a reaffirmation through a reversal. Miller as the strenuous moralist comes to the middle point of his life and brings himself to trial. He not only confesses, he accuses himself. He brings himself to a rigorous self-examination, for he wants to bury himself as an idea and finds himself as a person. Miller sheds off his sicknesses through the experiences of the lawyer Quentin. This is against the critical spirit of the bulk of contemporary literature which celebrates negativism. Resisting the forces of evil that operate the human mind, Miller dramatizes the folk of America. *After the Fall* dramatizes the story of Quentin, a lawyer who has been living merely in the service of his success. Addressing an unidentified 'Listener',

Quentin relives and examines some of the important attachments in his life. Analyzing his relationships with his father, mother and brother, he recalls his two marriages, the first to Louise which floundered and broke on the shoals of disinterest and non-communion and the second to Maggie, which began with high hopes and the quest for love and ended in hatred, guilt, recrimination and death and remembers an involvement with Falice, a young woman whose idolization of him makes him realize with concurrent pangs of selfishness and shame his power over another person's life. He also reviews two important friendships with Lou, a gentle sensitive professor who committed suicide after being harassed by a congressional investigating committee and with Mickey, a fellow attorney, who did testify and knuckled under to the committee's demands. And throughout his contemplation of these harrowing relationships, Quentin attempts to discover what bond, if any, exists between himself and the concentration camp whose blasted stone tower remains a focal image in his mind throughout the play. Probing these relationships, he comes to a moment of painful decision. Having fled from a series of major and minor upheavals, he has finally arrived at a point where he must find himself, if he is to marry Holda, the new woman in life and make a fresh start with her.

To Quentin at the beginning of the play existence has proved to be a pointless litigation... before an empty bench. At the conclusion, after reviewing the wreckage of his life and the lives he has helped to smash, he arrives at the simple but profound realization that love and compassion are not enough, that life must be taken for the absurdity as it is, and also all dangerous denials may be accepted. Quentin's sufferings and reasonings are generated by a great depth of emotions called fear and shame. These emotions gradually lead Quentin to the other side of his real self. His self-discovery and self-awareness is ignited by his consciousness which in turn paves the way for his new relationship with Holga. *After the Fall* juxtaposes a man's agonizing confrontation of the heart of darkness in himself and in humanity with the tenuous and illogical hope that springs not from the evasion of knowledge, but from its acceptance:

“like the protagonists of Dante's Inferno,  
Quentin has found himself in the middle

of the journey of his life, in a dark wood  
where the straightway was lost and  
in the subsequent search for the way out,  
has come to understand his complicity in  
that darkness, a complicity centered in  
the phenomenon of separateness which he  
could hardly acknowledge in the early part  
of the play. His separateness however cannot  
wholly eradicate the fact that he still  
lives in a world of other men, in which  
choice and responsibility are implied” (Nelson 269)

Within the context of inherent guilt and communal responsibility, Quentin acknowledges that we are all separate people, bound by choice:

“Quentin’s find vision accommodates guilt  
as a given human nature, responsibility  
as a necessity of human experience and love  
as the guarantee of hope” (Nelson 269)

*Incident at Vichy* is an exciting drama of clash of ideas, which emerges and lift the play out of the post-second world war problems to a universal theme of humanity. The play of course repeats Miller’s usual theme of self-knowledge under the pressure of forces both temperamental and environmental. In *All My Sons*, the self-awareness of evil impels Joe Keller to commit suicide. The suicide of Willy Lowman is the expression of tragic helplessness in Willy which transcends the limitation of material success. John Proctor’s heroic resistance to the social evil becomes convincing only in the historical context of the play. The agonizing awareness of the evil in Quentin in *After the Fall* is too passive to save Maggie. The freshness of *Incident at Vichy* consists in the play’s capacity to transform the sense of guilt into responsibility. The play dramatizes a daily occurrence in 1942 France the systematic rounding up of suspected jews and other undesirables by the Vichy government as it yielded to German racial laws on this particular morning, eight men and a boy have been corralled into a detention center and lined upon a

bench, none of them sure why. The play records the suspicious, the misgivings, the self-assurance, and the delusions of the Jews who know their identity papers are false but refuse to believe in the death camp. Two of the prisoners and one German are of particular interest. The German is a wounded combat officer, who has been forced into the police assignment and detests it. More important to his argument are the other two. One is a former French officer, who has thoughts of overpowering the guard and trying to escape. The second is an Austrian nobleman, who had left Vienna in disgust after Nazi occupation. A Gentle lover of the arts he despises the Nazis because they are so crude vulgar and tasteless.

In the end, the dramatic confrontation is between these two prisoners. The Frenchman is suspicious of the nobleman because he is convinced that all non-Jews have somewhere within him a strain of Anti-Semitism, while the Austrian protests that he is not merely a superficial and theoretical idealist. for a time it seemed that Miller was proclaiming the doctrine that all who are not Jews bear a share of guilt, but it is the Austrian who makes the sacrifice to save the life of the French Jewish ex-officer:

“Like beckett’s archetypal pair in *Waiting for Godot*, Miller’s characters wait in the detention space, talking a bit in the process and more importantly creating as a defense the illusion of their significance (Schlueter 102).

The abducted of Miller’s play are trapped in a situation from which there is no exist, yet they continue to pretend that freedom will come. As the prisoners wait to be summoned individually into the adjacent room, where the identity check takes place, they deny the desperation of circumstance, replacing despair with hope even as it becomes increasingly clear that there is none. But the vision of Miller’s play extends to a judgement of human nature not as helpless occupant of an arbitrary world in which there is nothing to be done but as heir to a moral depravity that demands action and accountability from everyone. No one in Miller’s sorry group of oppressors and oppressed escapes blame, all are participants in a human shame incapable of being collectively or individually denied. If the judge’s bench is empty in *After the Fall* here the seat is occupied by Arthur Miller’s presiding as Moral

judge over all human kind. Miller's existential concerns are clearly delineated in Vichy. The play through existentialist in theme is rationalistic in structure. Like Sartre, Miller writes about the absurd in coherent terms. The central crisis is precipitated by Nazism but Miller's analysis of the cause of this evil is more existential, than political or sociological and is expressed in terms of the Sartrean concepts of Nothingness and Dread. In a word, *Incident at Vichy* is a kind of play that is bound to receive its dispassionate treatment with the distancing of time. It is a triumph for Miller in a fresh direction and is likely to be acclaimed; a minor classic. It breathes an air of freshness and austere simplicity. Totally it appears as the hallmark of the age.

*The Price* published in 1968, is also a revival in which Arthur Miller returns to and revitalizes that quintessential American family, the Lowmons. *The Price* is an intriguing play. In form and structure, it heartens back to *All My Sons* and *The Death of a Salesman*; in its themes, it is similar to *After the Fall*. Structurally the Price is a solidly constructed play made in the tradition of Ibsen, in which the conflict spirals out of an involved set of past relationships. The dialogue is basically expository and revelatory probing the past and examining a house built on lies, while simultaneously leading to a series of discoveries that shatter the illusions that have enveloped and almost suffocated the house. Here, Miller returns, to his perpetual gladiatorial arena, the family in a renewed exploration of the relationship between actions and consequences, guilt and responsibility and self-preservation and commitment to others. The play dramatizes the ambivalent relationship of the two brothers Victor and Water Frenz. Indeed, in a sense, as Miller has suggested *The Prince* owes more to *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* than to *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, for he is more concerned with probing the nature of human freedom than with exposing the social charade. "*Incident at Vichy* is about 'tomorrow morning' and *The Price* in turn about man's continued surrender of identity and submission to a false concept of human nature" (Bigsby 16).

The play *The Price* couples the problem of attaining success with that of being true to oneself, themes which are central to all the major works of Miller.

Walter, the successful surgeon, whose primary loyalty has been to himself and who had abandoned his father and brother when they needed his help, is reminded of the price he has paid to gain wealth and power. Walter's brother Victor, on the other hand, has sacrificed his chance for a professional career out of a sense of duty to the father, he felt he had to support. On the surface, the situation, seems to be recapitulation of familiar instances in which Miller has pitted rectitude against egoism. In reality, however, both brothers in looking for justification of their past have been deceiving themselves about their underlying motivations. Each brother is battling with conflicting forces in himself which remain partially incomprehensible. It is true that these two brothers resemble the two in *Death of a Salesman*. In *Death of a Salesman*, the two brothers Happy and Biff reflect the two sides of Willy's warring personality. Happy values only material things. He looks for some kind of consolation in his relationship with women and though vaguely conscious of some insufficiency measures himself solely by reference to his success in business. Biff on the other hand is aware of other values than the purely material and is capable finally of the kind of genuine humanity which Willy only approaches in moments of rare sensitivity. In *The Price* also Miller makes use of a similar device. The two brothers represent profoundly different approaches to life – approaches which not only co-exist in the world but which constitute the basis of most individual lives. This is the significance of Walter's remark that follows thus:

“We are ... brothers. It was only two  
seemingly different roads. Out of the  
same trap it's almost as though ...  
we are like two halves of the same guy.  
As though we can't quit... move ahead  
alone” (The Price 429).

The qualities of the two brothers are ambiguously presented. At first sight, it appears to be simply a contrast between heroic self sacrifice and callous self-interest. But beneath this public face is the naked figures. This apparent reversal of moral force is evidence of Miller's wish to penetrate to the pantheon of forces and values which must lie behind the realistic surfaces of life. Gregory Solomon, the

Wandering Jew the ancient furniture dealer, is not only the crowning personification of man's will to survive but of his unadulterated zest for living. A multi-dimensional figure in his own right, he is also integral to the relationships and meaning of the play. Like Victor, Walter and Esther, he too has paid his prices for survival.

Like the earlier play *After the Fall*, *The Price* has a further intriguing dimension in that it offers an insight into Miller's sense of his own role as a successful playwright. Gunter Grass has said thus: "art is uncompromising and life is full of compromises. To bring them together is a near impossibility and that is what I am trying to do" (Bigsby 19). Through *The Price*, Miller has tried "to account as best he can for the realistic surface of life" (Wager 16). In short, it may be stated that in all his works despite crushing obstacles, something is achieved, the possibility of responsibility and action is restored and Miller's continuing exploration of the ramifications of determinism and free will, guilt and responsibility, drift and action, represents his revolt against a theatre signing dirges of woe. No doubt, he is a dramatist of ideas who wrote plays for illuminating the intense desire of one man to carry on continuing and meaningful dialogue with other men.

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