

# Arthur Miller

## A Critical Study

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY



CAMBRIDGE

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## ARTHUR MILLER

Christopher Bigsby explores the entirety of Arthur Miller's work, including plays, poetry, fiction and films, in this comprehensive and stimulating study. Drawing on interviews conducted over the last twenty years, on unique rehearsal material and research archives, he paints a compelling picture of how Miller's works were influenced by and created in the light of events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is an enjoyable insight into a great playwright that will interest both theatregoers and students of modern drama.

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and has published more than thirty books covering American theatre, popular culture and British drama, including *Modern American Drama* (Cambridge 1992) and *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge 1999). He is co-editor, with Don Wilmeth, of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, which received the Barnard Hewitt Award for Outstanding Research from the American Society for Theatre Research. He is also an award-winning novelist and regular radio and television broadcaster.

For Ewan, with love and pride

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## NOTE ON THE TEXT

Throughout the text references in parenthesis to Arthur Miller's autobiography *Timebends* (London, 1987) appear as *T.* followed by page numbers.

Any unsourced interview material comes from interviews with Arthur Miller by the author over a period of years.

## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page ix
<i>Note on the text</i>	x
Introduction	1
1 The Michigan plays	8
2 <i>The Golden Years, The Half-Bridge, Boro Hall Nocturne</i>	27
3 The radio plays	40
4 <i>The Man Who Had All the Luck</i>	54
5 <i>Focus</i>	67
6 <i>All My Sons</i>	78
7 <i>Death of a Salesman</i>	100
8 Arthur Miller: time-traveller	124
9 <i>An Enemy of the People</i>	138
10 <i>The Crucible</i>	147
11 <i>A Memory of Two Mondays</i>	174
12 <i>A View from the Bridge</i>	178
13 Tragedy	198
14 <i>The Misfits</i>	213
15 <i>After the Fall</i>	228
16 <i>Incident at Vichy</i>	248
17 <i>The Price</i>	271
18 <i>The Creation of the World and Other Business</i>	289
19 <i>The Archbishop's Ceiling</i>	295



20	<i>Playing for Time</i>	312
21	The shearing point	325
22	<i>The American Clock</i>	337
23	The one-act plays: <i>Two-Way Mirror</i> and <i>Danger: Memory!</i>	352
24	<i>The Ride Down Mount Morgan</i>	366
25	<i>The Last Yankee</i>	382
26	<i>Broken Glass</i>	391
27	<i>Mr Peters' Connections</i>	405
28	<i>Resurrection Blues</i>	421
29	<i>Finishing the Picture</i>	437
30	Fiction	444
31	Arthur Miller as a Jewish writer	473
	<i>Notes</i>	490
	<i>Index</i>	507

## INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen's writing career stretched over forty-seven years, Strindberg's over thirty-seven. Chekhov's lasted twenty years. In 2002, sixty-six years had passed between Arthur Miller's *No Villain*, a university play which won two prizes, and *Resurrection Blues*, voted best new play first produced outside New York. Two years on, in 2004, came *Finishing the Picture*.

Longevity, of course, is no virtue, unless you happen to be a Galapagos turtle. In Miller's case, however, nearly seventy years as a writer had seen a succession of plays that served to define the moral, social and political realities of twentieth- and then twenty-first-century life. At the turn of the millennium, British playwrights, actors, directors, reviewers and critics voted him the most significant playwright of the twentieth century with two of his plays (*Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*) in their top ten.

Curiously, he had fallen out of favour in his native America for the previous thirty years. His new plays were not well received, even as his classic plays of the 1940s and 50s were taught in schools and universities and regularly revived. Elsewhere in the world, however, his plays of the 1970s, 80s and 90s found a ready audience. In 1994, *Broken Glass*, his play set at the time of Kristallnacht, was poorly received in New York while winning the Olivier Award, in Britain, as best play of the year.

In part, this is a story of poor productions in America, in part of those drawn to what seemed to them more innovative theatrical figures: European absurdists, the American avant-garde. Wedded to a notion of Miller as an incorrigible realist, an approach laid down early in his career when *All My Sons* was taken as paradigmatic, and when he was attacked by many of those he characterised as Trotskyites, critics failed to acknowledge the radicalism of his theatre. He was regarded by some as deeply unfashionable, at odds with the times. Robert Brustein, Richard Gilman, Philip Rahv, John Simon dismissed his new plays as, in the 1940s, Mary McCarthy, Eric Bentley and Eleanor Clarke had rejected his earlier ones.

His concern with the past and its connection with the present, the basis of a moral logic which tied action to consequence, had always seemed a counter-current to American presumptions. This, after all, was a country which leaned into the future, regarded history, in Henry Ford's words, as bunk and proposed

as its central contract with the individual the possibility of beginning again. Miller spoke of the tongue of the past being torn from the throats of American writers. For his part, he felt the pressure of history as something more than a burden to be relinquished, a sepia print transforming lived experience into mere nostalgia. He addressed it not simply because it contained lessons best not disregarded but because we contain the past while private truths reach out into a public world.

For his part, later in his career, he was apt to set his plays in the 1930s, in Europe or South America, as once he had set them in the seventeenth century and in Mexico. He was prone to insist on the individual's responsibility for his or her own actions, and for the state of the culture, even in the 1970s and 80s when the very concept of society, with its mutual interdependencies, was being challenged and self-interest promoted as a virtue. Once he had been drawn to Marxism, seeing in that the political embodiment of his moral beliefs. When that no longer seemed credible, destroyed by those who cloaked themselves in a politics so manifestly at odds with their actions, he was left with beliefs now rooted in nothing more profound than an assertion that individual and society exist in a symbiotic relationship and that the acknowledgement of that fact is central to a moral life.

A Jewish atheist, he felt constrained to reinvent the God in whom he did not believe by invoking a native existentialism. We are, he insisted, what we do and what we do has implications for the social world we inhabit and which in turn is shaped by those who will it into being. It followed that he rejected totalitarianism but also fashionable ideas of the absurd. Humankind, he insisted, was neither the mere product of circumstance, of class, of a history seen as independent of human will, nor a cosmic victim, expression of metaphysical irony. Despite what he saw as the casual games-playing of postmodern theorists, nor was he willing to regard individual character as mere construction or authorship as a chimera.

As a consequence, for some he seemed the product of another age who had never matured to understand the futility of human endeavour or the writer's duty to deconstruct his or her art. In Europe, however, where the past is never dead, where history lives on the pulse and totalitarianism has either been centre-stage or standing in the wings awaiting its cue, Miller's seems in every way a modern voice. He is Cato, alive to the possibility of apocalypse, even atheistic Jews being aware of how thin the crust of civilisation can be. But he is also a man who grants integrity to the individual will and imagination, who understands the power and limitations of love. He stages the lives of those baffled by an existence whose meaning frequently evades them but whose struggle to understand and prevail is one of the justifications for an art which itself seeks form in seeming chaos.

Miller is Jewish. He was raised in a family that had carried its faith across an ocean, even if the full intensity of that faith diminished under the impact

of American pragmatism. His grandfather, once the necessary compromises of business had been set aside (he worked on the Sabbath), became a mainstay of the local synagogue. Miller's parents were less intense in their convictions, adopting new values along (in his father's case) with a new language. They still performed the rituals, respected the traditions, but they were intent on consolidating a new identity which would see them accepted by those who lived their lives beyond the carefully drawn, if invisible, lines which defined their neighbourhood.

As a young boy, Miller felt excluded from such mysteries (writing about his sense of exclusion years later in a short story in which he recaptured the sense of bafflement he felt at alone being granted immunity from religious imperatives), as if he were denied access to necessary truths. Inducted into the faith, he duly mastered the Hebrew necessary for his bar mitzvah at the age of thirteen. This was a rite of passage less elaborate than that performed by his older brother, Kermit, who was required to be fluent in more than one language, a piece of showmanship which had less to do with religion than pride on the part of an upwardly mobile family anxious to underline its new status. He even found himself in a synagogue one afternoon, looking for some secret that might give shape to the swirl of feelings which assailed him, only to be met by the amused smiles of the men he found there, secure in their mysterious faith and disturbing equanimity.

In time, however, other commitments would lead a teenage Miller away from shul. Introduced to Marxism, which saw religion as an opiate, he wondered what would become of the ornate buildings that were a testament to a faith now revealed as factitious and retrogressive and, indeed, as the Depression deepened so congregations did begin to drift away as if something more than an economy was in disarray. When he married he did so outside the faith, though his Catholic first wife no more believed in her religion than he did in his. They were both revolutionaries alert to the collapse of old forms and thrilled to be present at the birth of new ones.

Yet there was more to Judaism than its spiritual core. It spoke its own history, expressed values and attitudes that lived in the blood, having come down through the centuries as so many stories, as a rhythm of confidence and despair. Later, he would declare his commitment to a Jewish culture while renouncing the metaphysical engine that powered it, simultaneously announcing his own self-exile and continued membership in the tribe. In a sense it was his own version of that balancing act Jews had always had to perform as they were simultaneously welcomed and rejected, located themselves as part of a wider culture yet always apart, afraid of the very assimilation which on another level they so desired.

There were those who hid their origins, changed their names (as Miller was himself accused of doing, not least by the FBI), slid into the mainstream by wearing a mask, learning to shape themselves to what they took to be a

desirable form. There were others who laid claim to this shape-shifting culture that was America by offering themselves as interpreters, the so-called New York Intellectuals, from Queens and Brooklyn, who set out to explain America to itself and in so doing gave a different sound to the culture. They wrote histories of American literature, became commentators on a changing world, simultaneously evidence of what they described.

By degrees something of the tone of such writers, fiercely and self-advertisingly intelligent, often ironic and humorous, began to seem simply that of modern America. Jewish-American writers became not so much a sub-category as exemplary figures writing out of a sense of insecurity that was by now so general that, paradoxically, they became secure in their role. They spoke of alienation, angst, a crisis of identity, but these were precisely the concerns of those who had emerged from the Depression into an atomic age and who watched as the old certainties seemed to dissolve in an affluent but uncertain age.

Miller, however, was never part of this group and was seldom considered as a Jewish writer. In the many books and university courses which seized on this figure, he was a notable absence. When the New York Intellectuals based themselves in City College in the 1930s, he was up in Michigan, struggling to survive, financially and academically. When he returned he remained in the basement of his family home in Brooklyn or a rented apartment striving to break through into the theatre or churning out radio scripts in order to buy time for what he still believed his real work.

There would, indeed, be those who accused him of wilful defection from a cause he never embraced and even an identity he never denied. Why, they asked, were his self-evidently Jewish characters not acknowledged as such, as though the Jew could not be legitimately proposed as a root for the universal? In large part such questions betoken ignorance of the number of his plays, produced and unproduced, from 1935 to the mid-1990s, which did feature Jewish characters, but beyond that was the implication that he was in flight not only from faith (in truth abandoned by many of the New York Intellectuals) but from his own identity. It is an odd charge to level at the man who wrote *Focus*, one of the first novels about anti-Semitism in America, as it is at the man who, in *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, *Playing for Time* and *Broken Glass* dealt with the Holocaust and its prelude to a degree that no other American playwright has done, and few other playwrights anywhere.

After the war, a curious silence had fallen with respect to an experience that stunned the mind. Those who had lived through the Holocaust at first hand could find no language adequate to express it. It was an experience, it was felt by some, that could only be demeaned by utterance. It was something more than the silence of the grave because it contained a truth about human possibilities which seemed to lead nowhere but such a silence. There was also a sense of shame, undeserved, irrational, that a people could be thought to have

conspired in their own extinction as though submitting to a historic fate for which past suffering had suddenly seemed mere prelude.

For Miller, it would be marriage to his third wife, the Magnum photographer Ingeborg Morath, that gave it a concrete reality and hence a legitimate metaphoric force. Together, they visited a concentration camp – she, an Austrian, who as a child and young woman had rebelled against the Nazis but nonetheless felt the burden of genocide; he, Jewish, feeling a connection, always there but never previously so immediate and direct. The themes of his work – betrayal, denial, power – remained the same but were now attached to a history, always known, felt, but now finding dramatic form. As a writer he had always insisted on an organic connection between past and present but here was a past that had resisted understanding. Only when he had written *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* could he write *The Price* in which a Jew is a comic figure and the figure of the survivor as paradigm moves to centre-stage.

Miller himself was born into a wealthy immigrant family. His father, like his mother's parents, came from Poland. America was promise and possibility, liberation from the past. They had journeyed in hope and hope seemed justified. They had worked their way up from a Lower East Side tenement to an eleven-room apartment on the southern tip of Harlem, an apartment that looked out over Central Park. They had a chauffeur-driven car, a Polish maid and a summer cottage on Long Island.

What Henry Luce would later call the American century was well under way. There was even a train called *The Twentieth Century* and those who climbed on board knew that they were doing more than take a train trip. America was rich and getting richer. High above the city, on the underside of clouds, advertisements, projected from the rooftops, boasted of the products of a consumer culture in which consumption seemed a national virtue. If the Jews had believed themselves God's chosen people, against the evidence of centuries of persecution, Americans knew themselves to be chosen, for were they not surrounded by the proof? America was the very image of the modern. The world had begun to dance to its music, to be entranced by the images produced by a film industry which was itself a product of immigrant Jews. The wanderers of the world had found a home.

Then, in October 1929, the foundations began to slip. The clock stopped and the American century went into free fall. And among its many victims was the Miller family. Isadore Miller, who employed around eight hundred people in his women's coat company, had learned the false wisdom of the age. He had invested in the stock market and had borrowed to do so. There was so much more money to be made in stocks and shares than manufacturing that only a fool would choose not to invest. Now someone had thrown a handful of grit in the machine.

The family lost, if not quite everything, then most of what they owned. The car, the maid, the country cottage went, along with Augusta Miller's jewels, sold by her young son Arthur who took them to the pawnbrokers. The eleven-room rented apartment went, too, and they moved across the bridge to Brooklyn. Central Park was exchanged for East Third Street, the vast apartment for a utility home. Family life suddenly became strained. Miller's grandfather moved in with them and the fourteen-year-old found himself sharing a bedroom with a man known contemptuously as 'the lodger' and whose authoritarian ways were the source of further friction. Isadore Miller tried, out of a sense of honour, to pay off his creditors, and to start again, but each year millions more were without work.

In one sense, a young Arthur Miller was unfazed by the move. Brooklyn, still semi-rural, offered a sense of liberation. His main interests were football and track. He could now ride the El to Coney Island for the fishing. But options were closing down. When he graduated from high school none of the family attended the ceremony. Though he was hardly academic, like Biff Loman flunking maths, he had assumed he would move on to university. He even took catalogues home to discuss the options, only now realising that there was no money available. What followed were two years in which he earned money working in an auto-parts company, an experience he would later memorialise in *A Memory of Two Mondays*.

Finally, in 1934, he made his way from Brooklyn to Michigan where the university had agreed to take him on, effectively on probation since his grades would not normally have won him a place. In that first year he dedicated himself to his work and to writing for the *Michigan Daily*, the student newspaper. Though he had little time for the various political groups on campus, he did join the peace movement, signing the so-called Oxford Pledge in which he undertook not to take part in any future war. He had, to be sure, already been converted to Marxism, as a result of a kerbside conversation back in Brooklyn and now sent letters home alternately asking for money and proudly confessing to his new faith in a future to be transformed by radical thought and action. His mother sent the money and waited out what she must have hoped would be a momentary enthusiasm, not least because it would seemingly put her son at odds with her husband, a man who still believed in the system that had betrayed him. A young Arthur Miller, though, had a new faith. He was now consolidated in his beliefs, more especially when, in a distant Spain, the small town of Guernica was bombed by the fascists and when he witnessed at first hand (as a reporter for the *Michigan Daily*) the autoworkers' strike at Flint, Michigan.

He had chosen Michigan in part because of the Hopwood Awards. These offered cash prizes for playwriting and he knew he would need to raise money if he were to complete a degree. According to Miller, in the spring break of his freshman year, he sat down to write his first play, though it was not submitted

until the following year (Martin Gottfried, in his biography of Miller, suggests that the play was not written until 1936; for his part Miller is adamant that he wrote it in 1935). It was a work directly modelled on his own family. He knew little about the theatre, uncertain even as to the length of an act. The result was *No Villain*, a play that seems to have shared the Hopwood Award and that convinced him not only that he could write plays but that that was what he wished to do as a career.

In 1937 he won the Hopwood for a second play, *Honors at Dawn*, while in 1938, the year of his graduation, he was runner-up with *The Great Disobedience*.





## The Michigan plays

*No Villain*, the play Miller recalls writing in the spring of 1935 rather than return to his family home, lays his new Marxist credentials on the table from the very beginning, with an epigraph from Friedrich Engels: ‘Now for the first time a class arose which, without in any way participating in production, won for itself the directing role over production as a whole and threw the producers into economic subjection; a class which made itself the indispensable mediator between every two producers and exploited them both.’

*No Villain* (in subsequent revised versions also known as *They Too Arise* and *The Grass Still Grows*) draws very directly on his family life. It opens in the parlour of a six-room home in ‘a suburb of New York City’, plainly the Millers’ Brooklyn house on East Third Street<sup>1</sup>. The Simons are an immigrant family, once successful but now fallen on hard times. They anxiously await the return of their son, Arnold (in several places referred to as Art, Miller’s name), from the University of Michigan.

The father, Abe Simon (Miller’s uncle was called Abe), is, like Miller’s own father, the energetic but illiterate head of a coat company. Also like Isadore Miller, he had once been a salesman and, like him, is now in financial difficulties, lacking the money even to send his son the bus fare to return from the university. His wife’s father, like Miller’s grandfather, who had also been in the garment industry, lives with them. He even has the same name as Miller’s maternal grandfather – Barnett – though this is changed in subsequent revisions. Both are anti-union.

The other members of the family are Abe’s wife Esther, a version of Augusta Miller (like Augusta, described as tall and intelligent, here seen reading a book and, in a subsequent version, *Cosmopolitan* magazine) and Arnold’s brother, Ben (in one place in the typescript inadvertently named for Miller’s own brother, Kermit, and the same age as Kermit would have been in 1935 when the play was written). Like Kermit Miller, Ben has given up college to work in the family company, while a younger sister, Maxine, is clearly based on Joan Miller. The older characters, in particular, not only deploy a Jewish syntax but, like Miller’s parents and grandparents, pepper their speeches with German and Yiddish expressions. Arnold himself, meanwhile, is transparently a self-portrait by Miller, ‘over six feet tall, thin and angular’, a would-be writer, correspondent for the student newspaper and a Marxist. Like Miller, Arnold has taken a course on abnormal psychology at Michigan.