

The Moral Physician

Miller's Quest for Non-Melodramatic Absolutism

C. Scott Ananian

January 10, 1996

Arthur Miller has claimed, “I cannot imagine a theatre which did not want to change the world” [7], stating that “a good play must show as sound an emotional proof of its thesis as a case at law shows factual proof” [3, p. 85]. It is no surprise then that he is critically interpreted as “willy-nilly a moralist—one who believes he knows what sin and evil are” [2, p. xiv]. What is unexpected is Miller’s insistence on ambiguity in his characters, and his rejection of the usual melodramatic moral form.

This inconsistency is perhaps best focused by a consideration of *Salesman in Beijing*, Miller’s account of his experiences directing the first production of *Death of a Salesman* in China. As Miller recounts, Chinese art is interpreted monochromatically in terms of its “message,” a “reductionism fatal to art” [8, p. 187]:

It becomes clearer that part of the urge to bring *Salesman* here, and to have me direct it, was to show an ambiguous situation on the stage, one in which the audience would find itself understanding and even sympathizing with a man who is not particularly “Good,” or moral. In short, to let the real world into Chinese art. [8, p. 65]

Moral ambiguity is indeed a hallmark of the naturalistic style, one which distinguished it from the melodrama which preceded it. Miller’s condemna-

tion of such melodrama is made plain in *Salesman in Beijing*; his goal in China seems primarily to “rescue” Chinese theatre from “the old agitprop method of ‘acting-the-meaning,’ and of giving the audience no right to choose what it is to believe about a character. . . . The melodramatic urge is basically an authoritarian one in art” [8, p. 94].

How can a self-described Radical, “carrying on the age-old tradition of theatre as civic art” [3, p. 76], so easily exempt himself from the charge of authoritarianism? The revolutionary who writes, “minds may be illuminated by speeches. . . but it is by being moved that one [is] changed,” [3, p. 82] takes issue at the Chinese desire to know the play’s meaning? And how can one claim that the essence of a “real play. . . [is] the synthesis of even the least of its parts to form a symbolic meaning” [3, p. 85] while simultaneously dismissing “what the work is trying to say” as “not all-important” [8, p. 188]?

A clue may be found by examining the role of naturalism’s moral ambiguity in Miller’s work. Despite his position as moralist, his characters do not succumb to the Good/Bad duality of melodrama. In *Salesman*, “Willy is a lot of things but he is not particularly Good; it may even be that his faults and failings dominate him altogether” [8, p. 102], yet we are meant to lament his death. Proctor is *The Crucible*’s hero, but is tainted with adultery. Chris Keller in *All My Sons* resembles a melodramatic hero (“Chris makes people

want to be better than it's possible to be" [5, p. 245]), but is ultimately responsible for his father's death. Even Joe Keller is portrayed sympathetically, despite his condemned past actions. The clear-cut melodramatic hero/villain is absent from Miller's work.

It would seem that these ambiguous characters would sap the strength from Miller's moral message; after all, he attacks the theatre of the absurd precisely because "there is no guilt, no contract to be denied, no responsibility to shun" [1, p. xxxiv]. But Miller's Evil is societal, not personal, allowing him to side-step individual guilt in proclaiming his message of revolution. He claims *Salesman* is about "the alienation brought by technological advance" [8, p. 136] — a wording which conveniently absolves Willy from all guilt.¹ Likewise *All My Sons*, although superficially about Joe Keller's personal sin, ultimately exonerates him by condemning America: "Who worked for nothin' in that war? . . . Half the goddam country is gotta go if I go!" [5, p. 285] The Chinese version of moral clarity Miller objects to—"not necessarily requir[ing] that Good people win out in the end, but [that] they must not be mistaken for Bad people" [8, p. 102] — is replaced by an absolutism of thought. We are not to question that Joe Keller should not have shipped the cylinder heads,

¹Harold Clurman rhapsodizes on "the destructive role played by the consecration of our fixation on success" [2, p. xvi], similarly pardoning Willy.

nor do we doubt that Willy's dream for Biff is tragically mistaken ("He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong." [6, p. 130]); but Joe and Willy are not guilty for it:

CHARLEY: ...Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. [6, p. 130]

This denial of personal responsibility is necessary to Miller's revolutionary goals. As audience, we must identify with the protagonist and recognize his faults as our own if we are going to act to correct them. A condemnation of the protagonist would make us reluctant to identify with him, defeating Miller's intent. The sympathetic portrayal of the condemned Evil perhaps weakens the playwright's message, but ensures its adoption.

This fact is easily overlooked. The Judeo-Christian moralism Miller stands on does not so easily excuse individuals for the faults of society, and Miller's characters expound this truth relentlessly:

CHRIS: ... there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that's why he died. [5, p. 288]

Passages like these must be viewed as referent to the world to which Miller is writing, not the one represented on stage. On stage we find that every

character has an excuse, but Miller knows that there must be no excuses for the audience if they are to recognize their co-culpability. Christopher Bigsby writes that Miller “sees a flawed society as an extension of a deeply fallible human nature” [1, p. xxxiv], which is true when applied off-stage; but in his plays he instead portrays fallible human natures as extensions of a deeply flawed society; shifting the blame from the individual to avoid creating melodramatic villains.

Central also to Miller’s merciful treatment of his protagonists is his strongly-expressed belief in the redemptive power of love.² He claimed that “*Death of a Salesman*, really, is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America” [8, p. 49]. Thus Willy may have killed himself, but it was because of his love of family. America’s myth of success tragically deludes the Lomans’, but their love of country remains solid. *The Last Yankee* and *Broken Glass*, more recent plays, continue to lean heavily on love as the *deus ex machina*, neatly providing plot resolution by the redemption of the protagonists’ faults or troubles.

These two newer plays also provide us with an apt metaphor to summa-

²It hardly need be mentioned that this concept as well sprouts from Miller’s basic Judeo-Christianity; for example, King David’s prayer after having committed adultery with Bathsheba is, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.” (Psalm 51:1)

Miller as playwright, accomplishes his revolution by infecting good people with society's ills, and then calling his audience to account for it. He avoids both melodrama and the theatre of the absurd's cosmic victimhood to create a realistic style with both clear meaning and naturalistic ambiguity. However, his maintenance of a double standard for the world within and without his plays necessitates a close examination of Miller's own remarks, to avoid confusing the merciful propagandist with the judgemental moralist. Once this dichotomy is recognized, one is free to appreciate Miller's art as he struggles to become a "light in the world" [4, p. 317].

References

- [1] Christopher Bigsby, introduction to *The Portable Arthur Miller*, Christopher Bigsby, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- [2] Harold Clurman, introduction to *The Portable Arthur Miller*, Christopher Bigsby, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- [3] Arthur Miller, “About Theatre Language” in *The Last Yankee*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.
- [4] Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*, in *The Portable Arthur Miller*, Christopher Bigsby, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- [5] Arthur Miller, *All My Sons*, in *Famous American Plays of the 1940s*, Henry Hewes, ed. New York: Dell Publishing, 1988.
- [6] Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, in *The Portable Arthur Miller*, Christopher Bigsby, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- [7] Arthur Miller, in an interview Oct. 16, 1996 at Princeton University.
- [8] Arthur Miller, *Salesman in Beijing*. New York: Viking Press, 1984.