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BETRAYAL, GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY: EXPLOITATION OF POLITICAL AND  
CULTURAL POWER IN "AFTER THE FALL"

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to examine Miller's exploitation of political and cultural power in his later play *After the Fall* and investigates its influence on the main themes of the play. The Great Depression, the Holocaust, and McCarthyism are the triple power in shaping Miller's major plays and become his twentieth-century correlative. *After the Fall* can be considered as Miller's indictment of social and moral weaknesses, which essentially depicts both the devastating forces of society and the passages of the human psyche—betrayal, guilt and responsibility.

**Key words:** *After the Fall*; Betrayal; Guilt; Responsibility; Political and Cultural Power

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INTRODUCTION

Of the five most important Americans writing for the theatre in the twentieth century—Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee, Arthur Miller has been more than a dramatist. Miller has been "a chronicler of American culture" (Otten, 1997, Preface ix) and "a penetrating critic of American society" (Carson, 1982, p.1). Miller shows a remarkable social consciousness in nearly all his plays. "No other American writer," Christopher Bigsby (1984) praises, "has so successfully touched a nerve of the national consciousness" (p.248). O. P. Dogra also mentions that "his renown as a dramatist is mainly due to the fact that he deals with the most dominant and perplexing questions of his day" (as cited in Ram, 1988, p.53). Atma Ram (1988) echoes Dogra's points appropriately, Miller's "plays have presented a critic consciousness of the times with realistic insight" (p.75). Since Miller has always proved so sensitive to the pressure of history, Abha Singh (1998) concludes Miller's work has been treated as "an embodiment of the social consciousness of the time" (p. 67).

Miller (1996) deeply believes that "society is inside man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations..." (Introduction xxiii). In his youth, Miller held a strong conviction that society could be changed, and that art could be an agent of that change. And in his more theoretical essays, Miller again and again turns to the social relationship to stress that drama and the playwright are "reflections of the social barometer" (ibid). Therefore, Miller has spent most of his adult life trying to make sense of the events through which he and his

contemporaries have experienced. Indeed, all Miller's plays are interwoven with social and cultural events in the American history. From his apprentice work *The Man Had All the Luck* to his senile one .... For Miller, every catastrophe was the story of "how the bird came home to roost" (ibid, Introduction liv).

Miller has faith in a moral world in which actions hold consequences for which individual and state must be held accountable, so, he determines to dramatize causality in the lives of his characters. It is in that sense that Miller (1990) says that "the job of the artist...is to remind people of what they have chosen to forget" (p.200). Rather than writing about Vietnam or civil rights, he continues to write about the major cultural and political events in the history, such as the Depression, the Holocaust, and McCarthyism. For Miller, those historical events represent "the same breach of faith and denial that American involvement in Vietnam and racism revealed" (Bigsby, 1997, p.136). So he chose to look back to the Depression in *The Price*, the Holocaust in *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*, and McCarthyism and the Depression in *After the Fall*. In his article "The Shadows of the Gods", Miller quotes "The powers of economic crisis and political imperatives which had twisted, torn, eroded, and marked everything and everyone I laid eyes on" (as cited in Brown, 1967, p.130). Miller is not only obsessed with the Depression, Fascism, and McCarthyism, to some extent, the Depression, the Holocaust, and McCarthyism become his twentieth-century correlative. Hence, it is necessary to analyze the triple powers in order to gain a better understanding of his plays.

### 1. CULTURAL AND POLITICAL POWER

To a greater extent, Miller's art has always been a reflection of his life. His personal experiences have shaped his political and philosophical convictions, and his need to understand himself and the life around him is the generating force behind his plays. Collectively Miller's plays reveal the efforts of one individual to confront and find some intelligible meaning in the events of the last half-century, which is mainly dominated by the three cornerstones—the Depression, the Holocaust, and McCarthyism.

#### 1.1 The Depression

The depression of the thirties shook the "Greatest Society on earth" out of its complacency and suddenly the favored "chosen few" of the "new Jerusalem" realized that poverty, stagnation, pessimism and imperfection far from being un-American, were, in fact, inbuilt in its structure.

The impact of the Depression on Arthur Miller was traumatizing. During the Depression, his father's business collapsed and the family moved to Brooklyn. The Depression nearly ended plans for his education. The family business was gone, along with the stocks and shares. There was no money left to support him. He earned his way to university through a succession of small jobs. Miller later commented "Nobody could escape the disaster" (as cited in Welland, 1967, p.6). In the opening words of his play *The American Clock*, Miller mentioned, "The Great Depression touched nearly everyone wherever they believed and whatever their social class. Personally, I believed that deep down we are still afraid that suddenly, without warning, it may all fall apart again" (as cited in Smith, 1986, p.4)

The Depression had a lasting effect on Miller's thinking and it were the major influences on the playwright's slowly developing view of life. Not only did they come close to destroying his father, who never completely recovered his financial position, but they put serious strains on the young Miller's relationship with other members of his family. The relative poverty to which they had been reduced meant that sacrifices were called for and every desire to place self-realization above family solidarity implied a fundamental betrayal. Even more profoundly the failure of the economic system called into question everything that young Arthur had seen or learned up to that time. The promise had been a fake. The 'reality' was not the chauffeured limousines of Harlem, but the breadlines of New York and the man fainting from hunger on a back porch in Brooklyn. Miller became convinced that "there was an invisible world behind the apparent one, and he began to search for the hidden laws that would explain this catastrophe" (Carson, 1982, p.5). One of his biographers, Neil Carson calls it "the most formative crisis in Miller's life" (as cited in Smith, 1986, p.4). Abha Singh (1998) confirmed that it was the Depression that gave Miller "a passionate understanding of man's insecurity in modern industrial civilization, his deep-rooted belief in social responsibility and his moral earnestness" (p.79).

No other single factor is more important than the Depression in determining Miller's work. Certainly the Depression haunts his plays, from the nostalgia of his autobiographical essay 'A Boy grew in Brooklyn' or

even the more bitter-sweet *Memory of Two Mondays to The American Clock*, a history of the Depression of the 1930s in both national and personal terms. "The Depression left a permanent scar on his imagination" (Biggsby, 1997, p.134).

### 1.2 McCarthyism

Lasting roughly from 1950 to 1956, McCarthyism is the anticommunist movement launched by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House of Representatives, which set itself to identify present and former Communists and so-called fellow travelers in all branches of American life. During the McCarthy era, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers and became the subject of aggressive investigations and questioning before government or private-industry panels, committees and agencies. Many people suffered loss of employment and/or destruction of their careers; some even suffered imprisonment. In the atmosphere of mass hysteria that was build up, many witnesses, although completely innocent of any crime, found themselves ostracized by their friends, dismissed from their jobs, and even under physical threat from some over-zealous 'patriot'. The fear engendered caused many suicides. McCarthyism was a widespread social and cultural phenomenon that affected all levels of society and was the source of a great deal of debate and conflict in the United States.

It was the McCarthy era when so many writers and performers—moved by fear or economic necessity or a genuine break with their ideological past—stepped forward to confess their political sins and to name their fellow sinners. Arthur Miller saw actors, writers, and directors called before McCarthy's investigating committee to confess to socialist principles and to name others who shared these sympathies. Before the House Un-American Activities Committee in June, 1956, he refused to name people he had seen at Communist writers' meeting seventeen years earlier.

Having himself been called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and having urged an idealistic course of action on a colleague who subsequently committed suicide, Miller is made suddenly aware of "the complex nature of moral responsibility and the suspect nature of idealistic demands, and recognizes social evil as a projection of private failure" (Biggsby, 1984, p.211). Miller's political awareness is also "sharpened in the 1950s by the McCarthyite anti-Communist witch hunts" (Welland, 1967, p.18). Miller himself wrote McCarthyism's influence on the play in the "Introduction to the Collected Plays":

It was not only the rise of 'McCarthyism' that moved me, but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality, a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance (as cited in Smith, 1986, p.8).

His own response to the growing anti-Communist hysteria of the early fifties was to write an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and then *The Crucible*, set during the 1692 Salem witch trails but with obvious relevance to Senator Joseph McCarthy and to the House of Representatives.

### 1.3 Holocaust

The Holocaust refers to the systematic murder of more than six million Jews orchestrated by Adolph Hitler and the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in Europe during World War II. From 1941 to 1945, Jews were targeted and methodically murdered in genocide. Killings took place throughout Nazi Germany and German-occupied territories.

Arthur Miller is Jewish. It is a significant fact. It is not for nothing that the Holocaust lurks behind *The Crucible* and is a subject of *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, and *Broken Glass*. In 1964, Miller attended the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt. The Nazi trials sharpened his viewpoint about guilt and responsibility, prominent themes in both his 1964 plays, *After the Fall* and its companion piece, *Incident at Vichy*. Accordingly, Biggsby (1984) points out, "the Holocaust challenged Miller's liberal philosophy and theatrical strategy, which placed the self and its struggle with determinism at the heart of his concern" (p.215).

In Miller's early plays, characters focus the meaning of their lives on their names, but the concentration camp annihilates the name and the individual. Therefore, the process of *After the Fall* is designed to restore to the individual a sense of control, to reassert a moral responsibility. The companion piece to *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, embodies Miller's most critical and analytic response to Fascism and

to the Holocaust. In 1994, he once again returned to the past in a play set in 1938, *Broken Glass*, which is set at the time of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, but relates to a sense of moral and political paralysis which he saw being recreated in contemporary Europe.

## 2. BETRAYAL, GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY IN AFTER THE FALL

*After the Fall* is Arthur Miller's most experimental, subtle and profound work. It is "a culmination of his many earlier attempts to combine detailed psychological portraiture with a criticism of society and a search for ultimate meaning" (Carson, 1982, p.110). A number of critics have noted that *After the Fall* marks a change in his work. It essentially shifts focus from the devastating forces of society to the dark passages of the human psyche.

*After the Fall* addresses the problem of evil, for it depicts man "not only after his personal fall but also after the corporate fall that is the overwhelming fact of postwar Western culture" (Otten, 1997, p.109). The plot of the play takes in the Depression ruin, the McCarthy trials and their test for personal loyalty, and the evidence of German concentration camps. Theme of the play is dominated by the Depression, Auschwitz and McCarthyism.

### 2.1 Betrayal

During the McCarthy period, people betrayed their friends in order to free themselves. Miller tried to shed deep insights into the nature of human betrayal in *After the Fall*. Bigsby (1984) claims it as "a work of much greater scope than this suggests, braiding together, as it does, the Holocaust and the anti-Communist hysteria of the fifties in an attempt to locate the connective tissue linking private and public betrayals"(p.4). Actually, in this tangible work, Miller endeavors to "relate personal and public betrayals, to account for those failures of private and social morality of which the manifest evidence were the Depression, the holocaust and the persecution of 1950s America" (ibid, p.210). Betrayal is the major theme of *After the Fall*. Miller, then, fuses the Depression, McCarthyism, the Holocaust, and domestic betrayal in *After the Fall*. The whole play happens in Quentin the hero's mind. Quentin's memories link domestic betrayal, the Depression, McCarthyism, and the Holocaust. While Miller claims that *After the Fall* "reflects the sixties, illusion, denial, and betrayal have been his concerns throughout his career" (Bigsby, 1997, p.130-131).

In *After the Fall*, betrayal is both personal and political. Quentin proclaims that no one can be innocent after the Holocaust. On a domestic level, Quentin's mother had been betrayed by her father when he forced her to marry rather than pursue her college education when she found that her father was illiterate. In turn, his mother had betrayed his father by becoming a separate person when he lost his money in the Depression. His mother also had betrayed Quentin when he was a small boy by practicing a deception on him that made him feel abandoned. Wives betray husbands and husbands wives. Quentin betrayed his first wife Louise by sleeping with other women and Louise denied Quentin by being a domineering women. Though Quentin tried hard not to betray his second wife Maggie, but in trying to stop himself from thinking of her as a separate person, he has unwittingly denied her rights and created a huge overdraft of bitterness. Betrayal has a political dimension when Mickey asks permission to reveal Lou's name before the House Un-American Activities Committee, which would destroy his career.

Hence, Leonard Moss (1980) writes "His new play is a memory book of betrayals" (p.66). Indeed, a close study of Miller's *After the Fall* cannot but reveal the recurring experience of betrayal. To Miller, betrayal was a natural compulsion, and "denial and betrayal are marks not only of the individual but of a society whose leaders deny that very mutuality which is their justification for existence" (Bigsby, 1997, p.8).

### 2.2 GUILT

Miller is quintessentially an explorer of the shadowy human feeling guilt. As Robert Corrigan notes, "all Miller's characters are circumscribed by guilt" (as cited in Otten, 1997, p.106). Like Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge*, Von Berg in *Incident at Vichy*, or Phillip Gellburg in *Broken Glass*, they all bear the black marks of guilt. In any case, guilt has been ultimate concerns in all his major works.

Upon returning from the Frankfurt trials, Miller realized that "the theme of survivor guilt was emerging from [the] gargantuan manuscript," (Miller, 1995, p.520), which was *After the Fall*. As a matter of

fact, the image of the concentration camp tower “dominating the stage” in *After the Fall* reflects Miller’s contention that “guilt is eternal, haunting, and must be acknowledged” (Marino, 2000, p.114).

In *After the Fall*, guilt extends itself from the person to the social. Generally speaking, the play is the search of meaning by the hero Quentin. Miller describes the play as a trial by a man’s “own conscience, his own values, his own deeds” (as cited in Griffin, 1996, p.114). Quentin is guilty to his mother, father, friends and wives. To his mother, Rose, Quentin is guilty in trying to shift off her power and her wish. To his father, Quentin is guilty for not helping him with his business but pursuing his education. To his friend, Lou, Quentin is guilty in desiring for Lou’s wife Elise. To his first wife Louise, Quentin is guilty for attempting to have an extramarital affair. To Maggie, Quentin’s second wife, he is guilty for trying to change her and leading her to suicide.

The extension of guilt from the personal to the social, the latter in this case is symbolized by the Nazi concentration camp. The image of the concentration camp pervades the play, and Quentin sees it not only as a metaphor for the Holocaust, but also for McCarthyism, and for his own guilt about betraying others who depend on him. When asked why he chose to use a concentration camp in *After the Fall*, Miller (1987) explained,

I have always felt that concentration camps, though they’re a phenomenon of totalitarian states, are also the logical conclusion of contemporary life...In this play the question is, what is there between people that is indestructible? The concentration camp is the final expression of human separateness and its ultimate consequence. It is organized abandonment (p.108).

For Miller, as for many post-war Jewish-American novelists, the Holocaust is the modern equivalent of the Fall, the relentless reality of evil.

And for Miller, guilt is a primary social mechanism in that it is the unconscious acknowledgement of responsibility, of a world which consists of more than fragmental experiences. Though his early protagonists could never acknowledge that the source of guilt was in themselves, whereas the dilemma confronting the later protagonists is that such knowledge can paralyze the will. In *After the fall*, Miller’ accusing finger of guilt is leveled at both the individual and society, and the hero Quentin is redeemed not merely by acknowledging his own guilt but by accepting guilt itself.

### 2.3 Responsibility

At the heart of Miller’s work was an insistence that the individual had to acknowledge responsibility for his actions and that the past could make legitimate demands on the present. Like Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, or Phillip Gellburg in *Broken Glass*, they all win their way through to understanding by taking on total responsibility for himself or for the world, albeit on the edge of death. Miller’s chief struggle as an artist and as a public figure was to “reinvest the individual with a moral responsibility apparently stripped from him by economic determinism and the forces of history” (Bigby, 1984, p. 245). The Critic Leonard Moss (1980) also comments Miller’s plays “do suggest a humanistic thesis on mutual responsibility” (Preface).

The issues of free will and responsibility are at the heart of *After the Fall*. Quentin is condemned to be free in a world where he must take total responsibility for his life. The play reaches its conclusion as Quentin, approaching the tower, realizes,

Who can be innocent again on this mountain of skulls? I tell you what I know! My brothers died here...but my brothers built this place....And what’s the cure?... No, not love; I loved them all, all! And gave them willing to failure and to death that I might live, as they gave me and gave each other, with a word, a look, a trick, a truth, a lie-and all in love!(Miller, 1995, p.357).

As Miller explains, “no man knows himself who cannot face the murder in him, the sly and everlasting complicity with the forces of destruction” (as cited in Griffin, 1996, p.126). Quentin’s final realization, and the conclusion of his trial by his own mind and conscience, paradoxically both find him guilty and set him free to hope.

In Christopher Bigby’s words, “We are not the product of the past but of what we choose to make of that past, and that is the grace which this play offers and [Miller’s] earlier works do not...(as cited in Otten,

1997, p.133). Quentin is redeemed not merely by acknowledging his own guilt but by accepting guilt itself or, more strictly, responsibility.

#### CONCLUSION

Arthur Miller, as a chronicler of American culture and a critic of American society, has forged his plays on cultural and historical bedrock. In Miller's vision, the Holocaust, McCarthyism, and the Depression become the twentieth-century correlatives for the Fall.

A close study of Miller's *After the Fall* cannot but reveal his concern for human responsibilities, their guilt and decline in the modern society, the pervasive violence in man's life, the growing alienation of human individuals and the recurring experience of betrayal. All this is at the center of Miller's appraisal of life. These are the tissues that constitute the living organism Miller considers society to be. As a dramatist, Miller has looked around him with an unrelenting concern for modern society. To Miller, the crime is betrayal, the verdict is guilty, and the hope is responsibility.

No other American dramatist has so deeply tackled the anxieties and fears, the myths and dreams. And no other American writer has so successfully touched a nerve of the national consciousness. But Miller is claimed with equal power by the international community.

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