

Reflections of a Life

By Brad D. Parker
(<http://bdparker.cjb.net>)

Arthur Miller was born in 1915 to a Jewish family in New York City. He was born in a fashionable part of Harlem (Miller, *Timebends* 3), but grew up through the Great depression in Brooklyn (Miller, *Timebends* 5) working various manual labor jobs and eventually paying his way through the University of Michigan (Miller, *Timebends* 219-221). In the years since, he has written two lengthy autobiographies. *Timebends: A Life*, was written specifically as an autobiography, but the other account is in the numerous dramas, novels, and tales he has written since he was a student at the University of Michigan. His plays reflect his life through fictional portrayals of situations and characters that he knew personally.

Arthur Miller's home in Brooklyn, New York provided much material for his writing in later years. The largely Italian and immigrant population of Brooklyn became the cast of nearly every play he produced, and the action took place in New York more often than not. *A View from the Bridge* is the story of a hard-working longshoreman living in the Italian American neighborhood of Brooklyn. He is an honest man who is confronted with the moral problem of illegal immigration in his own home ("ECU Playhouse Stages Miller's 'A View From the Bridge'"). Miller would have been very familiar with all aspects of this drama because of the neighborhood in which he was raised. Because he drew from experience, he had no need to find his subjects in books, and his writing does not reflect that of any other American author (Bloom 1).

Arthur Miller gained an understanding for the plight of the common man and an understanding of the social conscience of the down and out hard worker from his humble beginnings. He could not escape his identity and his childhood, and whether it was intentional or not, it crept out through his writing. His values gained from his life in the Depression, through the Second World War, in the post-war period, and from his Jewish heritage are also the values of his characters. Many of his characters, especially Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*, though not intended to be Jewish, seem so. They hold Miller's traditional Jewish values and mannerisms. These characteristics made many of his plays seem too Jewish for wide acclaim (Bloom 5).

Another aspect of Miller's identity that continually reveals itself in his writing is the hardships he endured during the Great Depression. Although Miller's family was relatively well off at the time of his birth, the Depression was nearly the ruin of the family. This shift of fate forced Miller to take on the life of the blue-collar worker, the backbone of American society, and these experiences became the backbone of Miller's dramas (Miller, *Timebends* 221). His pattern of writing came out of his unspectacular childhood, which was so similar to that of millions of children of the Depression. The materials for his plays were the ordinary people he knew and the small sad events of common lives on the verge of poverty ("Death of a Salesman").

From the time of his very first plays which he produced while still at the University of Michigan, Miller focused on one single subject, "the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in society" (Moss 79). His best known drama, *Death of a Salesman*, is a prime example of this subject. It is the story of a traveling salesman; a hardworking family man who finds himself despised by his family

and rejected by society. He finds that despite his struggles he is a failure (“Death of a Salesman”). This is the story of the childhood Arthur Miller had himself. He was familiar with the plight of the ordinary man who worked manual labor for low wages and maintained a weak spirit of optimism nonetheless. This half-desperate, half-optimistic spirit is enough to keep the common man going, with the hope that one day, things will get better. As *Timebends* points out, Miller was especially familiar with this struggle because he was part of it.

After the Depression, Miller had to work for his living and his education in any way he could. He found a job in an auto parts warehouse where he and his coworkers were exploited by being kept uninformed and in unsafe working conditions. Years later, Arthur Miller wrote a play about his experiences in the auto parts warehouse. *A Memory of Two Mondays* is a fictionalized account of the plight of common workers in a warehouse, but based on his experiences (Miller *Timebends* 221). Even after establishing himself as an author, Miller liked to spend a few weeks each year working at some menial job because he said, “standing eight hours a day at a machine in one place, you know what it’s about” (“ECU Playhouse...”). Throughout his life, Arthur Miller has maintained an understanding for the working man and depicted this “American Everyman” time and time again.

By the 1950’s, the Depression was long forgotten, the stock market was going steadily upward and the economy was strong. Society had changed greatly since Miller’s early days as a playwright. Nobody wanted to see a play about workers anymore, and there were now greater social problems (Miller, *Timebends* 355). Those were the years of Senator Joseph McCarthy when an honest man could be condemned for holding any

ideas sympathetic to communism or socialism. This was an issue close to Arthur Miller because in his sphere of intellectuals there were some that thought communism was a feasible notion. Miller himself was accused of writing “thinly veiled socialistic tracts” in his dramas (Stewart 221). In response to this injustice and also because of an interest in American history, Miller wrote *The Crucible*. Miller saw a connection between the Salem witch trials and the McCarthy hearings. He said of the witch trials, “spectral evidence...made a kind of lunatic sense to them, as it did in plot-ridden 1952, when so often the question was not the acts of an accused but the thoughts and intentions of his alienated mind (Miller, “Why I Wrote the Crucible”).” Ironically maybe, in 1956, Miller was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee himself. After refusing to name communists that he knew, Miller was sentenced to pay a fine and serve a month in jail (Miller, *Timebends* 411-412, 455). Although by this time *The Crucible* had already been written, with an introduction linking it to the McCarthy trials, Miller’s firsthand experience with the House Un-American Activities Committee gave him further insight into the human nature that formed the basis of the events in drama.

In the same year Arthur Miller was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he married Marilyn Monroe. She profoundly affected his life as he also affected hers during the years of their marriage. He wrote the screenplay *The Misfits* for her, but soon after the movie’s production, Miller and Monroe divorced. In response to this, Miller wrote *After the Fall*, which included a thinly disguised portrayal of their unhappy marriage (Grolier). Maggie from *After the Fall* is often seen as representative of Marilyn and the emotional troubles she faced during the marriage (Miller, *Timebends* 527). Actually, the play was not based directly on Miller’s marriage, but he did draw

from his personal experiences. He also fed off of other people he knew, such as Louis Untermeyer, one of Miller's successful friends who lost his job and reputation because he was an accused communist (Miller, *Timebends* 262-264).

In 1987 Miller published his autobiography, *Timebends: a life*, which traces his life throughout all of the changes and struggles of most of the twentieth century. *Timebends* also tells a story of the important people in Arthur Miller's life and how they affected his writing. His writing was influenced by the social conditions of his life and by his personal experiences. These experiences make his writing understandable for the American public because they were shared experiences. The Great Depression was one of the few experiences that, at one time, all Americans could relate to because it was an experience they all shared (Bigsby 117). Miller's *Timebends* is an interesting story of the cycles of life and how one man affects another. It, like his dramas, is the story of Arthur Miller, but his is the story of the common man who has to struggle to gain a place in society. It is the story Arthur Miller lived, understood, and wrote about so that others could "live" it, so that they could understand. He wrote from his experience, the American experience, and shared what he knew personally with the world.

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