Arthur Miller American Literature Analysis

* [print Print](https://www.enotes.com/topics/arthur-miller/critical-essays)

* [document PDF](https://www.enotes.com/topics/arthur-miller/critical-essays)
* [list Cite](javascript:popUp('/topics/arthur-miller/critical-essays/analysis/cite',%20500,500);)

* [link Link](https://www.enotes.com/topics/arthur-miller/critical-essays#critical-essays-analysis)

A serious dramatist who believed in drama’s ability to bring about change, Miller explored both the social and psychological dimensions of his characters. For him, individual dilemmas always grew out of the crucial social contexts that confront average people. He is much concerned with how individual morality is influenced by the social pressure that press unrelentingly upon them. His dramas attempt to go beyond being merely simple pieces or self-absorbed psychological studies to deal in depth with moral and ethical issues. He was interested in how ordinary individuals can live in unity and harmony with their fellow humans without sacrificing their own dignity.

In most of Miller’s dramas, the family is the central unit through which he presented and explored social and ethical issues. Central to Miller’s family drama is the image of the failed father. In selling out his fellow men to protect his family business, Joe Keller in *All My Sons* indirectly causes the death of his own son, Larry. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman forces his false dream on his son, with disastrous consequences. Both fathers commit suicide. Quentin’s father in *After the Fall*, like Victor Franz’s father in *The Price* and Moe Baum in *The American Clock*, lose money in the Depression and go into devastating psychological declines.

The sons in Miller’s writing often strive to break their bonds with their fathers. Chris Keller, like Biff Loman, becomes disillusioned with his father’s false values. Quentin sees through his father’s phoniness, and Victor realizes his father’s betrayal. The father often represents the misguided and self-centered dream of material success that must be attained at any cost. The sons must break away from their fathers and their fathers’ worlds if they are to realize their own identities and lead more authentic lives.

In the family dramas, the mother has two sides. Kate Keller, like Linda Loman, both supports and defends her husband at all costs. In Miller’s later plays, the mothers refuse to accept the failure of their husbands. Quentin’s mother treats the father with contempt, and Victor’s mother vomits on his bankrupt father. Although the mother may be a source of stability in support of the father, she can also be a source of disillusionment.

Although some critics disagree, Miller sees his common heroes as tragic figures willing to sacrifice everything for their convictions even though their convictions are often based on false ideals or on private delusions. Willy Loman is a washed-up salesman; Eddie Carbone, a troubled longshoreman; and John Proctor, a simple farmer. Each is willing to die for his beliefs. Miller’s heroes proudly confirm their individual identity. Willy screams, “I am Willy Loman.” Eddie must defend his name, and John Proctor in *The Crucible* would rather die than lend his name to an evil cause. Naming names and accusing others is a serious offense. Dying anonymously in death camps is an abomination.

Miller’s heroes are not victims of inexorable social forces. Ultimately, they bear the responsibility for their own actions. Embedded in them is a sense of guilt, usually for sexual infidelity. Willy’s affair in a Boston hotel room haunts him, and Proctor’s adultery fills him with shame. Proctor, like Quentin, stands accused before his wife. The Puritan strain of sexual guilt, a recurring theme in American literature, is an undercurrent in Miller’s work.

Guilt for Miller, however, extends beyond sexual transgressions. It is centered in a more serious crime: betrayal, either of oneself or of others. Miller’s characters often live in worlds of illusion and denial, and those who escape from tragedy must undergo a process of self-discovery. In Miller’s cosmos, individuals must act upon their own consciences without betraying their fellow humans for private gain.

His plays, which often involve litigation, put society itself on trial. In a post-Holocaust world, no one is innocent. After the Depression, a shadow has been cast on capitalism and its promise of salvation through material prosperity. Socialism, which once held out the dream of a universal brotherhood, has given way to totalitarianism. In this fallen world, the individual must learn how to live with dignity and honesty against a backdrop of disillusionment.

Although labeled a realist, Miller has experimented with a number of innovative dramatic techniques. In *Death of a Salesman*, he intersperses time sequences from the past and present without using flashbacks. In *After the Fall*, he employs expressionistic stage techniques in a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The device of a narrator in *After the Fall* and *A View from the Bridge*and the authorial comments in *The Crucible* introduce a distancing effect to his dramas. The montage effect in *The American Clock* and the Pinteresque absurdist style employed in *Danger: Memory!* demonstrate his ability to handle a variety of dramatic styles.

Miller’s poetic use of idiomatic speech and his subtle deployment of dramatic symbols clearly indicate that his drama has moved far beyond photographic realism. Using a variety of approaches, Miller most often juxtaposes the past actions of his characters with the ethical dilemmas in which they find themselves. Through this technique, they are forced to define themselves in terms both of their social situations and of their moral convictions.

As Miller realized that his life was winding down, he felt compelled to write a final play, *Finishing the Picture*, to answer some of the questions that the public had about his life. This play, produced just months before his death, marked the end of a highly productive career.

**Focus**

First published: 1945

Type of work: Novel

*In this novel, the first of only two in Miller’s career, the protagonist learns to let go of his prejudices.*

Arthur Miller’s first play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, closed after only four performances in 1944, although in the same year, Miller received the Theatre Guild National Award. In this play, Miller was concerned with how people can find a spiritual home in an outside world that often is corrupt and destructive. It was essentially this concern that he explored in his first novel, *Focus*.

Initially, Lawrence Newman, a corporate personnel manager, is much concerned with propriety, with external appearances, as Willy Loman was in *Death of a Salesman*. The corporation for which he works gives him the sense of security that he needs, as does his neighborhood in Queens, where he is dependably loyal to the standards of behavior expected by his employers and by his neighbors.

Newman is racially intolerant. He builds his own self-esteem most effectively by categorizing people and filling groups in his mind with those whom he deems inferior to him. As he rides the subway to work every day, he observes the people around him, placing them conveniently into the categories that he has created. He places Jews in the column labeled “Avarice” and, by so doing, feels better about himself because he is a Gentile. Yet this sort of categorization goes still further. When he reads racist statements etched on the wall of the subway station or when he reads in the newspaper about the destruction of a synagogue by vandals, his heart races slightly because he feels that he is not alone and that, just possibly, a movement based on racial superiority is about to get underway.

Even though Newman supports his company’s policy of anti-Semitic racial policies, he is demoted, which leaves him bewildered. By now, however, Gertrude has added a new dimension—sex—to his life. He had deplored what he thought to be the blatant sexuality of Jews as he observed them from his subway set, but now he is himself an eager participant in what he had deplored in them. His rigid world begins to seem ridiculous to him. His comfort zone has been breached.

His first sexual adventure with Gertrude emboldens Lawrence to the point that he protests his demotion. He begins to feel what it is like to be a Jew when he gets eyeglasses that make him look Jewish and result in his being the butt of anti-Semitic comments in his racially discriminatory workplace. He gradually begins to see Jews as individuals rather than as broad, generalized types.

His epiphany comes in the form of a dream in which he envisions a carousel revolving on a plot of land above an underground factory. Through this dream, he comes to realize that beneath surfaces one may also find something deeper, something not necessarily good. His most heroic moment comes in his own Queens neighborhood when a group of anti-Semitic hooligans attack the only Jewish resident in the block and Newman (whose name suggests the change that has taken place in him) comes to the aid of the neighbor. When the police arrive, they presume that Newman is a Jew, and he does not correct them.

In the course of his gradual transformation, Lawrence Newman is forced to realize that racial prejudices adversely affect not only their targets but also their perpetrators. He also realizes that those who are racially prejudiced eventually become the very caricatures that their racial categorizing has created of the groups on which they look with contempt.

**All My Sons**

First produced: 1947 (first published, 1947)

Type of work: Play

*A man who sacrifices the lives of others for personal wealth becomes responsible for the death of his own son.*

*All My Sons* is a realistic drama with tragic overtones. The play is tightly structured. It takes place in a single day and a single place. Following the tradition of playwright Henrik Ibsen, Miller slowly unravels past events to reveal a moral wrong or sinister crime. Joe Keller is a prosperous manufacturer enjoying the fruits of his wealth. He is a jovial man with a loyal wife, Kate, and a devoted son, Chris, who will inherit his father’s business. Miller said that he started the first scenes slowly, without much action, but he plants unmistakable hints of menace early in the play.

Despite its realistic tone, the play has the air of a fatalistic tragedy. Larry, Joe’s son, was missing in action in World War II. After three years, he is presumed dead, yet Kate refuses to accept his death. As son, brother, and lover, Larry’s haunting presence overshadows the entire action. The night before the play opens, a storm knocks down Larry’s memorial apple tree, a sign of hidden guilt and the fall from innocence. Anne, Larry’s old girlfriend, is staying in his room, which still contains Larry’s clothes and his freshly polished shoes. Chris wants to marry Anne, but he is not sure that she has accepted Larry’s death. Even after Anne has accepted his proposal, Chris still kisses her more as Larry’s brother than as her fiancé. Also, as long as Kate will not accept Larry’s death, Chris cannot have his mother’s blessing to marry Anne.

Larry’s death is linked to a hidden crime: Joe Keller knowingly sold defective engines to the Army, causing the deaths of twenty-one pilots. Joe has pushed the blame onto his innocent partner, who is serving a jail sentence. Kate will not accept Larry’s death because Larry’s death will point to Joe as the murderer of his own son. Because Larry did not fly any of the defective planes, Joe considers himself innocent in his son’s death; Anne, however, reveals a letter from Larry in which Larry condemns his father for the deaths of the pilots and declares his intent to fly a suicide mission. Joe, who bears responsibility for his own son’s death as well as for the deaths of the other pilots, commits suicide.

In *All My Sons*, Miller explores the hidden order of the universe. The crime that Keller tried to avoid comes back to haunt him. His dead son’s voice condemns him from the grave. Although this play has been criticized for its melodramatic effects, *All My Sons* adds a tragic dimension to a realistic drama.

**Death of a Salesman**

First produced: 1949 (first published, 1949)

Type of work: Play

*An unsuccessful salesman relives his past, trying to discover the reasons for his failure, then commits suicide in order to leave his son his negligible insurance money.*

More effectively than any other American drama, *Death of a Salesman* probes the nature of the American Dream and its promise of success. America was established as a new Eden, a place where one could transform the wilderness into a paradise of riches. The American myth created the pioneer hero who moved with ease to greener pastures. One side of Willy Loman is firmly grounded in this myth.

Willy’s father was a traveling man who got rich peddling gadgets in South Dakota and then headed for Alaska. Willy’s brother Ben is a true adventurer who walks into the jungles of Africa at seventeen and comes out rich. Ben, who is constantly on the move, shunning civilization and its laws, is the self-reliant hero of the American myth who conquers the wilderness and makes his fortune. As a salesman, Willy also sees himself as an adventurer who opens up new territories in New England—once the original frontier.

The play focuses on a longing for the lost Eden. Willy admires the scenery on his trips to New England. He longs to smell the lilacs and wisteria that once grew in his suburban idyll, now overshadowed by dingy apartment buildings. He wants to build a house in the country where he can raise chickens and grow things. In the end, this American Adam is reduced to the tragic figure of a down-and-out salesman planting lettuce in a barren garden in the dead of night as he deteriorates mentally and contemplates suicide.

The theme of the Edenic garden coincides with the theme of the outdoorsman and the Western myth of open spaces. Willy is not only a gardener who, like Henry David Thoreau, wants to remain close to nature; he is also a man who can chop down branches, build porches, and remodel ceilings. His sons long to leave cramped offices and go swimming. Biff wants to go west to raise horses or to be a carpenter.

Willy holds onto two other American myths. The myth of “having it made” is embodied in Dave Singleman, who at eighty-four can sit back and make sales from his hotel room. Dave is the popular hero whose funeral attracts throngs of his loyal customers. Dave projects the image of the man who has “made it” in the system and who can make money effortlessly. The second American myth to which Willy subscribes is the “get rich quick” scheme. Like Ben, he hopes to find diamonds. He encourages his sons to establish a million-dollar sporting goods business with no capital and little experience.

Willy has based his notion of success on popularity and appearances, but Willy himself does not make a good appearance. Both he and his sons are out of place in a competitive world. The business world is changing; old promises are worthless. When Willy is no longer productive, he is fired. In the end, he “sells” his life for a twenty-thousand-dollar insurance policy in order to stake his son’s fortune. His death becomes merely another “get rich quick” scheme. Charley and Bernard, Willy’s neighbors, prove that success can be achieved, but for Willy Loman, who has absorbed too many American Dreams, the system inevitably becomes destructive.

In 1949, *Death of a Salesman* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The play ran for 742 performances. In 1966, a television production played to seventeen million people. In 1975, it was successfully produced at the Circle in the Square theater with George C. Scott in the lead, and in 1984, it played Broadway again with Dustin Hoffman in the lead. In 1985, Hoffman was featured in another television production of the play. *Death of a Salesman* has been produced around the world. In his book *“Salesman” in Beijing* (1984), Miller documents an unprecedented Chinese production. The play still appears in most college anthologies and continues to be taught as an American classic.

**The Crucible**

First produced: 1953 (first published, 1953)

Type of work: Play

*In a repressive Puritan society that is executing innocent people as witches, a simple farmer refuses to barter his conscience for his life.*

*The Crucible* is about the right to act upon one’s individual conscience. In Puritan New England, Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, demanded his right to act according to his personal conscience. In the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau considered the exercising of this right a moral obligation, even if exercising it resulted in breaking the law. The individual’s right to follow his conscience is part of the American heritage. In *The Crucible*, Miller shows how an ordinary individual living in a repressive community gains tragic stature by sacrificing his life rather than betraying his conscience.

Salem is a divided and disturbed community. Hidden behind its sacred crusade are the petty grievances of the self-interested and the vengeful. The town’s minister, the Reverend Paris, is desperately trying to stabilize his power and is more interested in maintaining his social position than in ministering to his congregation. When his daughter Betty, with Abigail Williams, Tituba, and other young girls, is seen dancing naked in the forest, he fears the scandal will bring down his ministry. Thomas Putnam is disturbed because he wants an excuse to confiscate his neighbor’s land. His wife, Ann, is jealous of Rebecca Nurse, who has more children than she. Abigail Williams consciously seeks to avenge herself on Elizabeth Proctor, who dismissed her from the Proctors’ service.

Miller clearly shows that in a community like this, which is at odds with itself, all that is needed to ignite hysteria is the specter of Satan, the epitome of insidious evil behind which small-minded people hide their own hostility and their quest for power. Soon experts such as John Hale are brought to Salem to find evil, even where it does not exist. Next, a high court invested with infallible judgment acts on the testimony of finger-pointing witnesses who indiscriminately accuse innocent people. Miller shows how judges at a purge trial lead witnesses to give the appropriate testimony. Tituba, a Barbados native, confesses to witchcraft because she knows what the authorities want to hear. The young girls accuse innocent people to deflect blame from themselves and to gain power and publicity.

In this climate of hysteria, John Proctor, a simple farmer, is called upon to act. Proctor, an independent man who is not afraid to oppose his minister and to work on the Sabbath, knows that the young girls are lying. At first, Proctor is reluctant to act. He withdraws from the town and tries to prevent his wife from incriminating herself. He not only knows that the young girls are making a sham of human justice but also knows that, deep down, he does not believe in witches—yet he will not confess to this heretical view.

Moreover, Proctor is a guilty man, a sinner, with hidden sin gnawing at his conscience. He has betrayed his wife and has committed adultery with Abigail Williams, so he also faces the judgment of his wife and has shaken her trust in him. Miller follows a theme in American literature, one that is especially pronounced in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. This theme examines the ways that private sin and nagging guilt intermingle with public sin. To save his wife and the town, Proctor must discredit Abigail, but to do so, he would have to expose his own guilt.

Proctor’s battle with the court is doomed, for the repressive court is implacable. He first tries to present concrete evidence, but in the Puritan court such evidence is suspect. A list of character witnesses becomes a source for suspicion and further interrogation. To question the court is blasphemy. In times of political and religious hysteria, everyone, including the witnesses, is on trial. Mary Warren, a young girl who strives to act justly and responsibly, breaks down under the pressure of the court and the hysterical antics of Abigail. Proctor tries to expose Abigail as a morally loose woman and openly implicates himself as an adulterer, but his wife lies to protect him. Even though Governor Danforth can see that the accusations of witchcraft are questionable, he continues to commit himself to a course of injustice rather than admit a mistake and discredit the court.

Not being a saint like Rebecca Nurse, Proctor is willing to lie and confess to witchcraft so that he can live and raise his family. However, when he is asked to name names and sign a public confession, his conscience will not allow him to ruin the names of others or to have his name used to justify evil. Only if he can retain his individual dignity can he pass on to his children anything of value. Proctor, an ordinary man, takes extraordinary action and is resigned to dying for his convictions.

*The Crucible* opened on Broadway in 1953 to a lukewarm reception, but it was later revived Off-Broadway with more success. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the screenplay for the French film version of *The Crucible*, *Les Sorcieres de Salem*(1955). In 1961, *The Crucible* was converted into an opera, and in 1967, it was adapted for television with George C. Scott in the lead role. *The Crucible* is Miller’s most frequently produced work both in the United States and abroad.

**After the Fall**

First produced: 1964 (first published, 1964)

Type of work: Play

*When a lawyer relives scenes from his past that test his ability to relate to the women in his life, he is forced to accept responsibility for his actions.*

*After the Fall* demonstrates one man’s struggle to survive in a fallen world. The fall from Eden is a recurrent theme in American literature—America, after all, was established as a kind of New World Garden, a bountiful paradise that would yield endless riches. It would bring forth an ideal community in which all individuals could live together in harmony and prosperity. The possibility of a fallen Eden, however, always lurked in the Puritan commitment to the individual’s natural propensity for evil. Some of the greatest American authors—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry James, and William Faulkner—have treated the theme of the fall. In *After the Fall*, Miller explores this theme in the light of the modern world. Quentin, the main character, who feels that there is no God to judge his actions, is an alienated man. He tries to plead his case to a sympathetic listener who is neither seen nor heard.

Quentin, a once-successful lawyer, examines his own conscience and becomes aware of his own fall from innocence. Through Quentin, Miller explores the historical context which has led humanity into a state of universal guilt. With his new girlfriend, Holga, Quentin visits a Nazi concentration camp. At the site, he is amazed to realize that human beings created such atrocities to slaughter nameless victims. According to Miller’s ethics, a hero dies affirming his identity by retaining the dignity of his name. Anonymous slaughter is anathema. The atrocities of the camps have made everyone, especially the survivors, guilty. Innocence is no longer possible, for the Holocaust of the Jews has violated all the principles of Judeo-Christian morality. The image of the concentration camp haunts Quentin throughout the play, a constant reminder that the world has fallen.

Quentin also experiences the guilt inherent in being part of a family. His father went bankrupt in the Depression, another symbol of the fall—a fall from economic stability that changed the American system and made once-successful men feel guilty for their own falls from prosperity. Quentin’s mother blames his father for the father’s failure to avoid economic disaster. Quentin becomes an accomplice as he begins to share her contempt for his father, inherent in which is the message that he himself must succeed. Dan is the brother who has remained loyal to the family, while Quentin, who sees through his father’s phoniness, has separated himself from the family. In his quest for self-knowledge, Quentin tries to go beyond blaming his troubles on the actions of his parents. Quentin tries to see family life as part of a fallen world in which betrayal and loss of faith prevail.

Quentin defends his friend Lou, caught up in the national hysteria promoted by the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, another sign of the fall. The American system is being distorted by petty publicity seekers who have no conscience about destroying people’s lives. People break faith and name names in absurd public confessions. They compromise their consciences for economic security.

The guilt, however, lies not only with the Committee. Lou, who once believed in the ideals of a communist brotherhood, has written a book distorting the facts about Russian life. The great idealistic cause of leftist sympathizers, such as Lou and Mickey, has been a fraud. The utopian vision that has been so much a part of the American consciousness has again failed; everyone is a “separate person.” Mickey is willing to betray Lou; Max, Quentin’s boss, will not easily tolerate Quentin’s support of a communist. Quentin finds himself stymied by the breach of communal fidelity and is groping for answers in a fallen world.

Another sign of the fall from Eden is seen in the sexual fall and in the presence of Eve as temptress and betrayer. In *After the Fall*, betrayal has its locus in women. Quentin comes to realize that his wife, Louise, is not his innocent, unfilled Eve. Quentin’s mother holds his father in contempt and refuses to share in the responsibility for their failure. Louise tries to separate herself from Quentin and to maintain her innocence. Maggie, the star singer whom Quentin subsequently marries, always sees herself as an innocent victim and forces Quentin to realize that he cannot save her from herself. The women in Quentin’s life are judgmental and often label men as idiots. Only through Holga, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, does the alienated Quentin learn to accept the responsibility for his actions and to persevere.

*After the Fall* was partially inspired by Albert Camus’s *La Chute* (1956; *The Fall*, 1957), which Miller saw as a book about troubles with women and about the impossibility of rescuing a woman who does not want to be rescued. The critics, however, could not divorce Miller’s play from its author. Miller was accused of being cheap and sensational in publicly exploiting his relationship with Marilyn Monroe. The play was labeled a self-indulgent confession. Others found it confusing and uneven. Miller, in turn, accused the critics of not seeing beyond certain autobiographical allusions in order to penetrate the deeper meaning of the play. *After the Fall* opened on January 23, 1964, as the first production of the new Lincoln Center Repertory Theater. The play was adapted for television in 1974 and was revived Off-Broadway in 1984, with Frank Langella in the leading role.

**The Price**

First produced: 1968 (first published, 1968)

Type of work: Play

*This play revisits much of the territory that was part of Miller’s social consciousness throughout his career as a dramatist.*

*The Price* involves two brothers, Victor and Walter, and focuses on the distribution of their dead parents’ belongings, all housed in a ten-room brownstone. The secondhand furniture broker, Solomon, has offered a thousand dollars for these belongings, and Victor has reached a tentative agreement with him, although his wife and brother both urge him to hold out for three times the amount offered.

The play involves family secrets and duplicity. The brothers’ father, who had been reasonably prosperous, suffered the fate of many during the Great Depression of the 1930’s and was reduced to living at a bare subsistence level. He made his sons realize that he did not have the wherewithal to send them to college. Victor accepted his fathers’ penury at face value, but Walter, who suspected that his father had squirreled away some money to increase his own sense of security, struggled to continue his education, eventually becoming a surgeon. Victor, meanwhile, became a police officer and, during the action of the play, has served on the police force for twenty-eight years.

As Walter’s fortunes increased, Victor at one point approached his brother, requesting a five-hundred-dollar loan so that he could continue his education. Walter, however, although he was easily able to spare the money, would not make the loan because of his suspicion, which proved to be quite accurate, that their father was hiding money from his sons.

Victor was always loyal to his father, even though his wife, Esther, wished that he might be slightly less loyal and might do something that would enable the two of them to lead more comfortable existences. Victor, who is scrupulously honest, could certainly use the money from the sale of his father’s assets, but he insists that the proceeds be shared equally with Walter, who has little need for them. Indeed, Walter suggests that the brothers simply donate their father’s effects to the Salvation Army in his name so that he might take a tax write-off that he would share with Victor. Victor, however, feels that he has made a commitment to Solomon and that he must honor that commitment.

Walter’s monetary success has done little to provide him with a happy life. He suffered a nervous collapse and had to be confined to a mental institution for some time. His wife has divorced him. Nevertheless, Victor begins to question whether his family’s life was worth the sacrifices he made to sustain it when Walter defected from his father’s house.

Walter offers Victor, soon to retire, a job as a hospital administrator. Victor wonders if he is too old to embark on a new career, but then he thinks of the eighty-nine-year-old Solomon, who, in buying out the estate of the brothers’ father for a thousand dollars, is setting himself up in a new furniture venture. As the play ends, Walter has come to view himself and Victor as two halves of the same person. Raised in the same household, they were forced to invent their identities when their father suffered business reverses. A bifurcation took place as each went in his own direction.

Printed from : https://www.enotes.com