

## **Contemporary Literature**

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Good morning, we are going to begin with Clara, a play, one of the later plays by Arthur Miller, the great American playwright. Arthur Miller, 1915 to 2005, he was, he is considered as one of the greatest American playwrights and he forms a trinity of the best American playwrights along with Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and of course, Miller. So, together they are considered the best American playwrights of the 20th century. Miller was born in New York, in the Brooklyn part of New York and from a very well known and well established Jewish family. His father was a manufacturer of hats and therefore, the family gets this surname Miller. Miller had an elder brother Kermit and his sister who was younger to him, later went on to become the famous stage actress, theater actress Joan Copeland.

One of the most formative influences on Miller's dramaturgy is the great depression. The great depression is an event of the late 1920s and which, which coincided with the fall of the wall street and it so happened that several families were ruined because of the sudden financial breakdown and Miller's family was extremely affected by this, by this event. The family has to soon move to a small frame house in Brooklyn and Miller also felt that there was a perceptible shift in attitude of his other family members towards him because of the loss of fortunes and this was one event which went on to influence all of Miller's works and we will find that how many of his other plays are influenced indeed by this, by the loss of fortune and what something like loss of wealth can do to a family. Miller studied journalism.

He entered the University of Michigan in 1934 and won the students award for play writing and from the beginning, his interest in family relationships was evident as he wrote several plays. Even his apprenticeship plays are about tracing the relationship between family members, especially between fathers and sons and brothers and brothers. After graduating in English in 1938, Miller returned to New York where he joined the famous Federal Theater Project. This is one another term that all of us should be familiar with Federal Theater Project and Miller wrote several plays during this time for the radio. Radio was a very important medium those days and Miller wrote a couple of

successful radio plays.

Group theater, another important organization was a part of Federal Theater Project and group theater was established by names like Harold Clurman, Sheryl Crawford and of course, Lee Strasberg. So, these were the famous names associated with the group theater. The group theater was an organization which was established to promote young talent of course, but of course, the works of those playwrights who wrote theater and plays about social changes, about social issues and this was the theme that the group was extremely interested. The members of the groups tended to hold left wing political views and they wanted to produce plays which dealt with important social issues. So, while working in the group theater, Lee Strasberg developed the famous method acting, his theory of method acting which derives from the ideas of the Russian Konstantin Stenislavsky.

So, the idea was that the actor should be so immersed in his role that he or she almost becomes one with the role. So, trying to form the utmost sympathy or empathy for the character and this Strasberg felt could be achieved through unlimited number of rehearsals which would lead to perfection. So, this was Lee Strasberg's theory of acting. Now, the group disbanded in 1941. They did enormous service to the world of theater in America.

However, by 1941 during the years of the Second World War, the group disbanded and it so happened that after the Second World War, most of the members of the group because they tended to hold left wing political views, they were investigated by the house and American activities committee. So, some members like Elia Kazan, we are going to talk about Elia Kazan more because he worked in collaboration with Arthur Miller on a number of plays and Miller and Kazan were extremely close at one point. So, Elia Kazan and Clifford Audits, another very important playwright of those times along with Lee J. Cobb who was also a very important theater actor. So, they testified before the house and American activities committee and named other members of the group who also held left wing radical views.

So, these people were granted some kind of clemency by the committee, but those who refused to name names of those other people, the friends or the colleagues who were also a part of the group theater or who also held left wing political views, they were blacklisted by the committee. So, that was the tone, moral tone of those times. Coming back to Miller, Miller joined a group theater. In 1940, Miller also married Mary Slattery and he had two children with her and Miller's first play appeared on Broadway in 1944. It was called The Man Who Had All the Luck.

This was followed by a novel, an anti-Semitic novel called *Focus* which was followed by his first successful play on Broadway. I am sure you know the name of the play, but anyway *All My Sons*. Again, it goes back to Miller's cherished theme of exploring the relationship between fathers and sons and brothers and brothers and it is about a family, a mid-western family where the father deals in manufacturing of air parts, but in order to make some quick profit, he sells defective aircraft parts to the army and what happens is there is a crash and which results in the death of several young pilots during the war and it ends with the son accusing his father of killing those pilots and at the end, the father shoots himself. He commits suicide and his last words are that of course, they were all my sons which means which you know creates sort of a bond between not just between members of one's own family, but also between family as a unit and also society as a part of you know a larger family. Structurally, it follows the conventional Aristotelian construction of plot.

You all know what Aristotelian construction is. You have a beginning, middle and an end. Also you have a beginning, you have the rising action, you have the climax, the falling action and the resolution catastrophe. The structure when we were doing *Oedipus*, we have already seen how the Greeks followed this structure very zealously and Miller also tried to follow the same model in his very first, the second play, the first successful play. So, it is also a play which observes the three unities.

So, you find unity of time, place and action. The entire action of the play centers on one single plot, one single theme. There are no major digressions. The play takes place in one particular home, the callers home and also it takes place within a period of 24 hours. So, it strictly confirms to the three unities.

So, structurally as we were saying, the play is quite close to the Greek tragedies. The play was directed by Elia Kazan. Elia Kazan who later became an informer for the HUAC, but during that time of *All My Sons* and some of Miller's early plays, Elia Kazan and Arthur Miller were extremely close. They were great friends, both were Jews and there was a kind of a bond between them. However, as we were just talking, Elia Kazan went on to name names before the house American activities committee.

He was also an extremely successful Hollywood director and producer. He has written a timeless memoir of his life called *A Life*, but after once he testified, there was a major rift between Elia Kazan and Miller. We will talk about that, but then Miller's next successful play after *All My Sons* was *Death of a Salesman*. *Death of a Salesman* is again regarded as one of the most influential American plays. It is usually clubbed along with Tennessee Williams as *Streetcar Named Desire* in terms of the risks, in terms of the theatrical innovations, in terms of technique and it is still remembered for those factors.

The play brought Miller international fame and became one of the major achievements of the modern American theater. It also won the Pulitzer Prize for the best American play of that year. It narrates the story and this is another timeless character from Miller, Willie Loman, a travelling salesman who is close to his death, who is near approaching his death. The title itself contains death in it. So, it should tell us about the play is all about and again his troubled relationship with his two sons, Biff and Happy, especially Biff and why? Miller delves a lot into flashback techniques and also expressionistic techniques which was, which he had borrowed from the Germans, which basically American playwrights have borrowed from the Germans.

So, talking about expressionism in Death of a Salesman, expressionism as a technique, as a movement is started, it grew in Germany and the major playwrights in Germany were Ernest Toller and George Kaiser. So, the plots and stories of expressionist films and theater, they often dealt with madness, insanity, betrayal and tragedy and they are opposite or they are opposed to the standard action adventure and romantic theater which was prevalent in those times. Expressionism as a technique is a practice in which subconscious thoughts or the subjective or inner realities of life are presented by a wide range of non-naturalistic techniques. The non-naturalistic techniques include distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, fantasy and symbolism. Expressionism started as a way to react against modernization and rapid urbanization of those times.

It was believed that man cannot cope with the rapid changes that are happening around him, especially after the aftermath of the First World War. It was a natural reaction to all those major changes, social political changes which were happening immediately after the First World War. If you remember or perhaps you can look for this painting by Edward Munch, The Scream. The Scream is a painting by Edward Munch which has a human figure. It looks like a human figure, but it is extremely distorted and it is screaming.

The figure is screaming. You cannot make out whether it is a male or a female or a child, but a human figure which is surrounded by dark non-naturalistic colors and brightly painted hues and the figure is screaming. It is horrifying depicting the horrors of the modern age. So, expressionism as a technique was first introduced on the American theater by Eugene O'Neill in his The Emperor Jones and the Hairy Ape. Tennessee Williams followed it up with A Streetcar Named Desire and then Elmer Rees wrote The Adding Machine where he famously created the character of Mr. Zero, a very common middle class person who lives a life of complete conformity and monotony.

The dominant theme in all plays which employed the technique of expressionism were

actually the dominant theme was horror of urban life and apocalyptic visions of the collapse of human civilization. Miller's next important play was *The Crucible* written in 1953. *The Crucible* is a kind of a parable. It is a morality tale. It is an allegory, but it is on the surface.

It deals with the lives of those people who were persecuted by the Salem witch trial during 1692. Salem was a village in the Massachusetts state of America where 150 people were tried and executed for so called practicing in witchcraft which is of course not exactly true and Miller wrote *The Crucible* as a response to the HUAC to the actions of HUAC. Miller himself was questioned by the representatives of the HUAC in 1956. The play was first performed on broad way in 1953 and the initial reviews were pretty hostile. People did not like because they could immediately connect the goings on the stage with the goings in America, but later on it went on to become a timeless classic.

*The Crucible* is still an extremely relevant play. So, the play was later adapted for a film by Jean Paul Sartre who wrote the screenplay. It was a French film. It was called *Les Sorciers de Salem, the Witchcraft of Salem* and very recently in 1995 to be precise, the film was again produced with Daniel Day Lewis and Winona Ryder and it was also called *The Crucible*. *The Crucible* was followed by a double bill.

Double bill is when an artist produces two plays simultaneously on the stage one after the other. So, the major play was *A View from the Bridge* and then it was the second play of the double bill was *A Memory of Two Mondays*. It was also the time when House American Activities Committee was harassing Miller a lot. At the same time, Miller's own marriage to Mary Slattery was faltering and soon it ended and Miller married the Hollywood star Marilyn Monroe. Life with Marilyn was not very easy for Miller.

She had her problems. For example, she was over dependent on prescription pills and Miller had a hard time trying to wean her away from her addiction, but the marriage could not survive. It was a very painful period for Miller. At the same time, he also wrote the screenplay of a movie, *The Misfits*, which he wrote primarily for Marilyn. It is about three cowboys and a girl. The girl is hugely inspired by the Marilyn character.

The film was shot on location in Veda. Soon things turned off very bad for the Millers and then Marilyn and Miller divorced as soon after the completion of *The Misfits*. Miller's life posed Marilyn Monroe. He came up with the play *After the Fall* in 1964.

I will erase it. *After the Fall* became quite a controversial play. Many people thought that Miller is trying to capitalize on his relationship with Marilyn Monroe. It is considered a sort of expose of the Marilyn persona. However, the play does have its

literary merits apart from the controversial angles given to it. The title is derived of course, from the Bible, The Fall, After the Fall.

It takes off from where Albert Camus left his existentialist novel, *The Fall*. That was the taking of point for Miller's *After the Fall*. Another thing that *After the Fall* is noted for is that after the respect, Alia Kazan and Arthur Miller again came back together as Alia Kazan directed *After the Fall*. The film, sorry, that is a play again was bogged down by controversies when it was first staged, but it has aged well and during its most recent production, it was reviewed extremely positively. During the 60s and 70s, Miller came up with two important plays, *Incident at Vichy* which is about the Holocaust, the theme of Holocaust in France and *The Price* which traces his own uneasy relationship with his brother, Kermit Miller.

In the 70s, he also wrote *The American Clock* and went back to his age old theme of delineating the depression years and its influence on his family. Miller has served as the president of PEN. It is a literary organization. It stands for Poets, Playwrights, Essays and Novelists.

So, he has served as the president of PEN. He has also been extremely politically active, socially active and he took extremely, played a very proactive part in supporting writers, those writers who lived in exile because of their oppressive regime. So, important playwrights like Valerio Soinca, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and even Salman Rushdie when there was fatwa against him and Miller came out and was very vocal in expressing his support for these plays when they were in trouble. Miller's plays of the 80s and the 90s and now, we are gradually coming to *Clara* which is the play that we are going to discuss. So, one of the most important plays of the 80s was the Archbishop's *Ceiling* which is based on writers in exile in communist Czechoslovakian republic. Then it was followed by *Elegy for a Lady* and some kind of a love story in another double bill in 1983.

Then he went on to write *Danger Memory*, *Danger Memory* which is and it comprises two plays, *I Can't Remember Anything* and *Clara*. Now, the interesting thing which is common between these two plays is that they both deal with the theme of memory, not about loss of memory, but what does memory mean to people, what can forgetting something lead to and this is what forms the crux of the two plays of the later 80s. So, we are going to talk about *Clara* in detail from next class onwards, but of course, let me finish the presentation on Miller. Later Miller went on to write another important play called *Ride Down Mount Morgan* which sort of traces in the moral excesses during the Reagan era, President Reagan. Then in 1994, he wrote his play *Broken Glass* which again traces the impact of holocaust on people's lives.

It was also the period when Miller wrote his extremely well received autobiography *Time Bends* in 1987. Miller continued writing his plays and of course, he was also a very prolific essayist and a columnist for the *New York Times*. In 21st century, so you see his career which began roughly about 1944 and it went on till the beginning of the 21st century. So, among his people who started writing along with him, you know Eugene O'Neill of course, he was slightly senior to Miller and Tennessee Williams, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Miller sort of you know survived all his contemporaries. So, that is you know his longevity something that amazes most people because he never gave up.

He was so interested in his work, in his craft that he continued writing till the very end of his life. So, he died in 2005, but before that he came up with Mr. Peters connections and it is also an extension of this theme, the memory theme Mr.

Peters connection. There Mr. Peters is almost like a Miller persona, mouthpiece of Arthur Miller. Mr. Peters is a very old man who is reminiscing on a life which has a well lived life where he has been married several times. He has children, he has been through a lot of social turmoil, personal troubles and all. So, in a way he is looking back, reflecting on his life and trying to make some sense of the connections that were that existed between him and the people who touched his life.

Another important play of this time is *Resurrection Blues*, *Resurrection Blues* which was written in 2002 and this is a satire, satire on media and contemporary materialistic values. Miller's last play was *Finishing the Picture* and it is very interesting that *Finishing the Picture* happens to be his last play which again reflects on his life with Marilyn Monroe. So, in *Finishing the Picture*, Miller takes us back to the times when the misfits for which he had written the screenplay and which was shot with Clark Gable, which was filmed with Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe. So, *Finishing the Picture* is all about how the misfits was shot on location in Nevada. Marilyn was extremely ill, she was hallucinating, she was depressed and all those elements which Miller perhaps could never talk to the public openly about.

They were brought in *Finishing the Picture*, perhaps it is sort of an exhaustsizing his demons and very significantly that was his last play and Miller died at his home in Connecticut, Roxbury in 2005. He survived by three of his children. One of the major contributions of Arthur Miller to dramaturgy is democratization of tragedy. Now if you remember the definition of tragedy as given by Aristotle, so a major feature of that definition is when we talk about an ideal tragic hero, he should be essentially a good man, man of noble birth or noble rank, a highly placed person who has a fatal flaw. Now

this condition high birth nobility, this was constantly questioned by Miller in depiction or representation of all his major heroes.

So, whether it is Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, whether it is Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, whether it is John Proctor or Eve in *The Crucible* and Quentin in *After the Fall*, no way can anyone categorize them as people of high birth or people who hail from the aristocracy, but Miller's major contribution to dramaturgy was precisely this in his celebrated essay *The Tragedy and the Common Man*. Miller argues that a common man is as apt a subject for tragedy as kings and royalty. His argument centers on the fact that there are no kings and queens anymore and what we see now, what we see today is a struggle, a day to day struggle in the lives of the common middle class people and all his characters are common people who deal with uncommon situations or even battle with everyday struggles and they are battered, but they eventually emerge as heroes. John Proctor, a flawed hero who has an adulterous affair with his servant girl Abigail and then he pays with his life. So, all good men, essentially good people who do a lot of good deeds for others, they are not of noble birth and they have some kind of a fatal flaw and they pay for it with their lives.

So, that is what Miller's legacy law is all about. His plays are written in extremely accessible language in the language of the common man. Also his plays make a hero of ordinary people. So, that is his contribution to the American drama. Major themes in Miller's plays are guilt and collective responsibility. Miller tells us that human beings are born with guilt, essentially guilty and that guilt of course, you know that notion of guilt is biblical and the idea of collective responsibility, that is an existential theme which Miller remains preoccupied with throughout his working life that all of us are human beings are responsible in some way or the other, not just for their immediate family, but also for the larger society that exists outside their closely knit families.

Miller's influences are extremely evident on the works of the later playwrights. For example, Edward Elmer Sells who is afraid of Virginia Woolf, *American Dream*, *The Zoo Story*. Then David Mamet whose *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a huge homage to Miller's *Death of a Salesman* because it also traces the lives and struggles of salesman like Willie Lohman. So, the characters of Roma and the other salesman who appear in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, they are extremely influenced by Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. And then of course, we have done John Guare and *Six Degrees of Separation* which again.

So, these are the playwrights who have questioned, who have interrogated the theme, the construct of famous American dream. What is American dream? And this question was raised first by Eugene O'Neill of course, and also famously in *Death of a Salesman*. And later on these playwrights continued Miller's legacy as far as themes are concerned.

Harold Pinter on Miller says and I would read quotation by him. Miller and I had a memorable trip to Turkey about twenty years ago when we met a lot of writers that had been in prison and had been tortured.

I admired him tremendously for his independence and his clarity of mind. So, the idea is that Harold Pinter and Arthur Miller, they had travelled together to Turkey to support a group of writers who were imprisoned. And it was during that time that Pinter felt that Arthur Miller is not just a namesake figure head of pen, but he was extremely proactive in his support for those writers who were in trouble. So, on his eightieth birthday Salman Rushdie said about Arthur Miller, moral stature is a rare quality in these degraded days.

Very few writers possess it. Miller's seem innate. When I needed help, I am proud that Arthur Miller's was one of the first and loudest voices raised on my behalf. On his death, PEN America, the organization PEN America, it instituted the Arthur Miller freedom to write lecture. So, it was considered a very fitting tribute to a person whose entire dramaturgies centered on expression of the self and freedom for the people. Miller has also been interestingly extremely well received in India. His plays are regularly staged both in English as well as in regional Indian languages in India.

So, particularly important are Death of a Salesman, All my Sons, The Price and recently there was an adaptation in Hindi of I Cannot Remember Anything and Clara. So, Miller's legacy lives on. Clara died in 2005, but Miller forms, Miller still is a major force in the theatrical tradition of contemporary times.

So, we will begin with his Clara from next time onwards. Thank you. Thank you.