Suicide and Self-Sacrifice in the Works of Arthur Miller

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SUICIDE AND SELF-SACRIFICE IN THE WORK OF ARTHUR MILLER

BY

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Abstract

Many of Arthur Miller’s earlier plays deal with the subject of suicide, with the lead character either contemplating or actually committing suicide during the course of the rising dramatic action. Miller saw suicide as a way to bring the play to its conclusion, with the guilty party receiving “justice” by his own hand. The death of the main character also allowed Miller to voice his concerns about the ills of society, such as the cost of capitalism on a man’s soul and the inherent damage of mass hysteria. This thesis will explore suicide and self-sacrifice in the works of Arthur Miller, and how suicide and sacrifice are major themes in All My Sons and Death of a Salesman, The Crucible and A View from the Bridge, and finally After the Fall and Incident at Vichy.

As Miller is considered an American theater icon, I was curious to see how such a taboo, morbid topic like suicide operates in his works. I consider this thesis a chance to see how suicide works in each play, and how events in his own life altered Miller’s views on suicide. The suicide of Miller’s ex-wife Marilyn Monroe will be discussed.

Four of the plays end with the death of the main character. The leads commit suicide in All My Sons and Death of a Salesman. James Proctor of The Crucible and Eddie Carbone of A View from the Bridge go willingly to their deaths. Miller’s later plays After the Fall and Incident at Vichy are studies of the collective guilt of humanity, but still featured characters that commit suicide and sacrifice their lives.

Miller’s earlier characters committed suicide out of self-justification and atonement. Joe Keller shipped defective parts for the sake of his family, and commits suicide for the same reason. Willy Loman wishes to be successful for his family and he believes his suicide will provide money for his son Biff to be successful. Both Joe and
Willy work to become good providers, but wreck their families in the process.

Miller’s plays move from one man breaking society’s laws to the conflicted Everyman attempting to find his place in the world. In *The Crucible*, John Proctor can save his own life by confessing to witchery, but chooses to be hanged rather than lie and disgrace his name any further. In *A View from the Bridge*, Eddie Carbone’s sexual obsessions result in him informing on two immigrants, thus breaking the prime rule of his neighborhood. In a desperate attempt to regain his name, Eddie fights one of the immigrants but is stabbed with his own knife and dies. These deaths can be seen as suicide by proxy.

After the suicide of his ex-wife, movie icon Marilyn Monroe, Miller’s views on suicide changed. In the semi-autobiographical play *After the Fall*, Quentin shouts to his self-destructive wife, “Suicide kills two, Maggie! That’s what it’s for!” This memorable quote will be explored in the thesis.

*Incident at Vichy*, the final play in the thesis, takes place during World War II. A group of men in France wait to be interrogated by the Nazis to see if any are Jewish. An Austrian baron gives up his pass to freedom so a Jewish doctor can escape, even though that means the baron will be executed himself. This sacrifice will be examined, and what part responsibility and guilt played in the baron’s decision to sacrifice his life.

Miller did not put suicide in his plays to give them a dramatic ending. He told stories of men who were destroyed. But those men keep their integrity, even those who have the wrong ideals but fervently commit themselves nonetheless.
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Acknowledgements

For Claire Killilea Coakley and Robert John Coakley
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 2
Cultural understandings of suicide ............................................................................. 4
I. Sons and Salesmen: The Atoning Father ............................................................. 6
   All My Sons: “I’ll put a bullet in my head.” ............................................................. 6
   Death of a Salesman: “What is this supposed to do, make a hero out of you?” .... 15
II. Crucible and Bridge: The Name Searchers ......................................................... 22
   The Crucible: “Leave me my name!” ................................................................. 22
   A View from the Bridge: “Give me my name, Marco!” ....................................... 28
III. Vichy and Fall: The Dark Heart ........................................................................ 36
   After The Fall: “Suicide kills two people, Maggie! That’s what it’s for!” .......... 36
   Incident at Vichy: “It’s not your guilt I want. It’s your responsibility.” ............... 48
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 54
Introduction

Many of Arthur Miller’s earlier plays deal with the subject of suicide, with the lead character either contemplating or actually committing suicide during the course of the rising dramatic action. As a playwright, Miller saw suicide as a way to bring the play to its conclusion, with the guilty party receiving “justice” by his own hand. The death of the main character also allowed Miller to voice his concerns about the ills of society, such as the cost of capitalism on a man’s soul and the inherent damage of mass hysteria.

Miller’s own exploration of the “Why” of life started regarding the Holocaust, which in the previous two decades had not been explored beyond a quiet horror, led to Miller questioning everything. “It was against this that Miller pitched his own native existentialism, his belief that man was of necessity his own God, the source of his own identity, obliged to accept responsibility for himself and the society which he joins in shaping. And if suicide might be a logical response to absurdity, renewed commitment was no less logical,” Christopher Bigsby explains. (Bigsby 62)

Personal contact with the apparent suicide of his ex-wife, Marilyn Monroe, seemed to change Miller’s use of the subject. He began to see it as a more personal act of self-destruction, designed to kill the victim and inflict serious emotional damage on the survivors. This is also the time when Miller’s plays moved from personal dramas to more universal studies about the tragedy of the human condition. The tragedy of Miller’s plays moves from one man breaking society’s laws to a conflicted Everyman attempting to find his place in a cruel world. Despite a near despairing view of the world, many of Miller’s characters view the final acts of their lives as both atonement for past failures
and an affirmation of ideals and love.

Theater critic Hilton Als described Arthur Miller as a "cold and moralistic writer." "During his long career, the Manhattan born playwright used his characters—a ruined salesman, a closeted dockworker, a crooked defense manufacturer, and other professional and moral failures (in Miller's world, the two were often intertwined) — in an obsessive attempt to show the ways in which the American male can be shaped and ultimately deformed by the pernicious dream of success." (Als 96) This deformation often results in the death of these failed characters at their own hands, or through a proxy.

Characters in Miller plays do not commit suicide out of physical necessity. None of them are teenagers or young adults. With the possible exception of "ruined salesman" Willy Loman, none of them are suffering from disease. Some readings and performances of *Salesman* suggest Willy is suffering dementia instead of a psychotic denial of reality. The characters who take their own lives operate under the assumption that their deaths will "fix everything." Willy thinks leaving insurance money for his family will mark him as a success. "Crooked defense manufacturer" Joe Keller in *All My Sons* thinks he can free his son and the rest of his family from his own guilt. John Proctor in *The Crucible* assumes that by refusing to "confess" and allowing his own execution, he will regain his good name and honor. "Closeted dockworker" Eddie Carbone attacks a stronger foe to regain his name, and is stabbed with his own knife.

Miller was affected by the suicide of Marilyn Monroe, even though they were divorced when she died. "Suicide kills two people, Maggie, that's what it's for!" the character Quentin shouts in *After the Fall*, which Miller completed shortly after Monroe's death. This shows Miller putting suicide on a higher plane than simply a way for a guilty
character to atone for his crimes. The play implies a search for understanding of Miller’s responsibility toward Monroe, of her inability to cope with her life and status, and of his failure to help her, if he or anyone really could.

**Cultural understandings of suicide**

Views on suicide have been influenced by cultural views on existential themes such as religion, honor, and the meaning of existence. Most Western religions consider suicide a dishonorable act. Early Christian teachings considered life on Earth unimportant compared to the promise of heaven. In the fourth century, St. Augustine, a Christian leader, said the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” made suicide a sin. “He believed that greatness of soul was proved by the ability to bear sufferings patiently.” (Francis 7) In the West, it has been regarded as a serious crime and offense against God due to religious belief in the sanctity of life. From a legal standpoint, the philosopher Aristotle said suicide damaged the welfare of the city and state through the loss of a “contributing citizen.” (Mecke 7)

However, Japanese views on honor and religion led to the act of “seppuku,” known outside Japan as “hirikiri,” being respected as atonement. It was practiced by the samurai as part of their code of Bushido. “When a bushi, or knight, was forced to choose between two courses of action, one of which involved the sacrifice of principle and the other the sacrifice of life, he unhesitatingly chose the latter.” (Colt 138) Other reasons for seppuku included restoration of honor, to keep a secret, admit an error, or protest the conduct of a superior. While the samurai were soldiers, seppuku extended beyond the military class to most of Japanese culture. Joe’s suicide in *All My Sons* can be seen as atonement, as well as the sacrifices in *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*. 
Dutiful suicide is an act of done in the belief that it will secure a greater good, rather than to escape harsh or fatal conditions. It can be voluntary, to relieve some perceived dishonor or punishment, or imposed by threats of death or reprisals on one's family or reputation. It can also be culturally traditional or generally abhorred. Perhaps the most famous example of dutiful suicide is a soldier in a foxhole throwing his body on a live grenade to save the lives of his fellow soldiers. Examples of this are strong in Chris’ thoughts in *All My Sons*. One soldier sacrificing himself for the whole unit seemed to crush Chris’ idea of self-worth, that he would never be able to be worthy of such a grand sacrifice. An important distinction is that self-sacrifice for others is not usually considered suicide, as the goal is not to kill one’s self but to save another. The man who throws himself on a grenade is not the man who threw it.

The principal view of modern medicine is that suicide is a mental health concern, associated with psychological factors such as the difficulty of coping with depression, inescapable suffering or fear, or other mental disorders. Suicide is sometimes interpreted in this framework as a “cry for help,” or to express despair and the wish to escape one’s problems, rather than a genuine and actual intent to die. Most people who attempt suicide do not complete suicide on a first attempt; those who later gain a history of repetitions are significantly more at risk of eventual completion. Most studies regarding suicide involve teenagers and young adults, while Miller’s characters are not children. They are adults outside of the “high risk subset” in most cultures.

“I think in the early plays the suicide was the highest stake he could envisage,” Bigsby says about Miller and his characters. “Each of them bets with his life, puts the full force of his life behind his conviction. In *Incident at Vichy* he was asking whether
genuine sacrifice was still possible, whether individual will still has any place in the context of the Holocaust.” (E-mail from Bigsby, May XX 2009)

I. Sons and Salesmen: The Atoning Father

_All My Sons: “I’ll put a bullet in my head.”_

_All My Sons_ (1947) features Joe Keller, a successful factory owner who sold airplane parts to the army during World War II. He allowed a batch that he knew to be defective to be sent out, and 21 pilots died as a result. Joe was arrested and tried, but put the blame on his partner. One of his sons, Larry, is missing in action, and his other son, Chris, is romantically involved with Larry’s fiancée, Ann. Near the end of the play, Ann gives the Keller family a letter explaining Larry committed suicide on learning of his father’s arrest. On discovering Larry’s suicide, Joe Keller finally accepts his responsibility for the crime and kills himself to free his family from his crime. He understands that men who died were all “his sons” and that he is the reason for Larry’s death, something he had been unaware of before.

Before Larry’s letter is read, Joe’s guilt is exposed to his family, and he attempts to explain to Chris his reasoning for sending out defective cylinders; he would have lost his business otherwise and been unable to provide for his family. He also held onto the hope that the army would never use the defective parts. Chris rejects this explanation, telling Joe that his responsibility to his country sometimes outweighs that to his family. “I’m his father and he’s my son, and if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head” Joe thunders in his own defense to his wife, Kate. (_All My Sons_ 77)

As Chris cannot bring himself to send Joe to prison, Chris believes he is not
moral and strong enough for Ann. Ann gives the letter from Larry to Chris, who reads it aloud. A letter from beyond the grave is melodramatic for Miller, who had kept the play as “real” as possible without flashbacks or dreams.

The letter describes how, upon learning about the investigation into the downed planes and his realization of his father’s guilt, Larry could not bear to live anymore. He told Ann in the letter that he knew he would be reported missing and that she must not wait for him. All realize that Joe was responsible for Larry’s death: Larry found out that his father was not the kind of man he thought he had been. He took his own life by crashing his plane during a mission rather than face the disillusionment he could now see through. This suicide stems from disillusionment instead of atonement.

Joe goes inside the house to get his jacket and presumably turn himself in; but while Chris and Kate argue, a shot is heard. Chris is in tears and sobs, “Mother, I didn’t mean to-” But Kate interrupts him and tells him not to take the blame for his father’s suicide. “Forget now. Live.” (All My Sons 84)

All My Sons also shows influence from the great Grecian tragedies of the likes of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. In these plays the tragic hero or protagonist will commit an offence, often unknowingly, which will return to haunt him, sometimes many years later. Also, when his offence catches up to him, the events of the play all occur within the time span of one 24 hour day, as does Sons. The protagonist must then learn his fault and suffer as a result, and perhaps even die. A tragic suicide is usually “socially motivated” to reinforces the values of the group. In this way the gods are shown to be just and moral order is restored.

The Greek plays, and those of Shakespeare two thousand years later, are about
kings, dukes or generals. Nowadays, we do not see kings as representatives of “the people,” much less politicians or captains of industry. When writers want to show a person who represents a nation or class, they often invent a fictional “ordinary” person, the “Man in the Street” or “John Q Public.”

In Joe Keller, Miller creates such a representative type. Joe is a very ordinary man, decent, hard-working and charitable. But, like the protagonist of the ancient dramas, he has a fatal flaw. This, in turn, causes him to act wrongly. He is forced to accept responsibility for his actions, even though he believed his love and responsibility for his family justified them. Joe also thought the capitalist system excused immediate concerns for money over idealistic concerns for soldiers. But Chris’ words and Larry’s letter nullify any rationalizations. As in the Greek tragedies, Joe’s suicide is necessary to erase the shame that his act has caused himself and his family, and allows Chris to live free from guilt.

Joe pleads, “A man can’t be a Jesus in this world” while defending against his lack of perfect selflessness in a pragmatic society. (All My Sons 83) Joe has worked his life for the good of his family, and his actions in letting the defective airplane parts be used was also for the “good” of his family, even though he was taking a risk not only on the lives of various pilots but also no one finding out. Joe was taking an astronomical risk for his business and his family. When Larry finds out, a few years before the start of the play, he knows what his father did and why, and becomes disillusioned with his father and wonders how he can keep on living. In his letter to Ann, he says he thinks he would kill his father if he had the chance, similar to Chris’s words. Larry kills himself as a consequence of Joe’s actions and not due to the fog of war.
Joe was not at the end of his rope. He did what he said he would do: If there was something bigger than his relationship with Chris, he would put a bullet in his head. It could very well be that thinking his relationship was the be-all and end-all of his existence was the reason he did not kill himself when finding out twenty-one pilots died as a result of his actions. Guilt seems to be the primary factor in Joe’s suicide: he did something wrong and it appears the only way to properly atone for it is self-destruction. This is Joe trying to show Chris that perhaps laying down one’s life for someone else does not really “solve the problem” as Chris thought it did. Self-sacrifice is not the ultimate solution to everything, despite what Chris saw in the war. After all, that was a combat condition. Chris, alive due to the selfless actions of others, may be viewing all of life as a situation where one should willingly sacrifice one’s life for another without any hesitation or regret.

The play focuses on Joe’s conflict of his two responsibilities, his responsibility to his family and that to wider society. He believes that he was justified in sending out cracked cylinder heads, as this allowed his family to make money and allowed Chris to inherit the family business. Joe thinks he has a higher obligation to his family over wider society, as there is nothing greater to him than family. Miller criticizes what he considers a “myopic” world view. Miller’s believes that people have a wider responsibility to the world in which they live, and expresses that belief through Chris. Joe eventually realizes that they were “all my sons.”

Joe achieved the American Dream that solidified after World War II, living in a “comfortable” house despite being an “uneducated man.” Miller emphasizes how one should consider the consequences of actions to reach the American Dream. However, this
material comfort which Joe worked for did little good to the family he claims to value above all else. Larry committed suicide as a result of his father’s decision to ship the cracked cylinders. It is through Larry’s letter that Joe realizes that he has not only killed one son, but the sons of other fathers. In conclusion, the American Dream becomes an American Nightmare, leading to guilt, shame and death.

Chris is particularly angry that his selflessness in fighting the war and the selflessness he saw in men is contrasted by the selfishness of those making money off the war. The fact his father was a war profiteer as well is the final indignity. Joe Keller’s suicide is the ultimate way to take responsibility for his actions.

Kate Keller refuses to accept her son’s death, saying that if Larry was dead, then Joe killed him. But it is unlikely Kate would realize without reading the letter that Larry’s death was the result of Joe’s actions. That would take any intuition she may have as a mother or a woman too far. Recognizing the death of her son would mean that she recognizes that her husband was responsible by shipping the defective parts, even though Larry did not fly a P-20. Before Kate hears the letter, the connection between the two is symbolic and regards a karmic balance to existence, more so than any rational cause-and-effect action. She declares that Larry must be alive, because God would not allow a father to kill his own son. “That’s why there’s God. Otherwise anything could happen. But there’s God, so certain things can never happen.” (All My Sons 28) She never considers that Larry would kill himself over his father’s actions, disillusioned and shamed to the point of suicide.

Chris’s and Joe’s respective beliefs are essential elements of each character’s personal trajectory, and these elements express how the past has an enduring influence on
the present which never goes away. Chris’s beliefs nearly cause him to abandon Ann, which would have led to a life without love, a spiritual suicide. Ann reveals Larry’s letter to Chris and the Keller family to prevent her own loneliness and allow herself a life with Chris. Joe’s beliefs are so strong that when they are proven false, he kills himself as atonement.

The first act illustrates the tensions between the characters that will rise to the surface in the second and third acts, culminating in Joe’s suicide. The Kellers seem like a happy family at first; it is even remarked that Chris is the rare sort of person who truly loves his parents. But there is resentment beneath the surface of their contented existence, resentment that reflects more than just grief at the loss of a son. Chris returned from World War II with a strong idealism that will not permit him to condone his father’s shadier business practices. Joe believes that his actions are legitimate if done for the sake of his family. Chris wants to send his father to prison. In the end, Chris must compromise his values in order to protect his own family.

Like her husband, Kate is in denial. She knows about Joe’s guilt, and it is the source of her anxiety throughout the play. She is complicit in Joe’s denial, and is forcing her son to stay alive, if only in her mind, in order to allow her to continue to live with her husband in some morally acceptable way. That is, if she had to accept that her husband effectively killed their son, then she could not stand it. But her loyalty to Joe ironically serves to separate the couple, since her knowledge of his guilt strains their relationship. Like her husband, she prefers to believe that there are forces outside her control — in her case, astrology and God’s will, both working for Larry’s survival — that ultimately dictate life or death more than individual choice does.
But all this is not the blind trust of a grief-stricken mother. She always knew in her heart that Larry was dead, despite many protestations to the contrary, as she could not bear the idea of Larry’s death being a punishment from God for Joe’s actions. When Ann shows her the letter that proves Larry’s death at his own hands, Kate suffers no great shock. She does not realize her son is dead, but that the universe she had built inside her head (like Willy Loman) is dead. And the punishment is not from God, but from Larry himself.

The title of the play becomes clear in Joe’s exit line. After years of denial, he is forced to acknowledge that the soldiers who died as a direct result of his actions were someone’s sons, and they all “might as well have been” his sons. But this line, with the title, actually serves two independent arguments that run through the work. All My Sons has both an emotional center and an intellectual center. The emotional center has the Keller family at its core, being primarily concerned with the impact of shameful secrets on family relationships. When the work is performed, audiences are usually struck the hardest by the story of the crime and its consequences for the Keller family.

“But Joe’s suicide does not completely clear the air; it seems more a gesture demanded by Chris — not an expiation of the crime — and Chris himself realizes too late.” (Brater 40) Both Joe’s sons talk about killing Joe, Chris in person and Larry in the letter to Ann. And this murder would not be for sending out the defective parts, but for shattering the “ideal father” that Joe was in their heads.

All My Sons is the story of that same crime and its consequences for the world instead of just the Kellers. If Miller is proposing a world-scale ethic of concern for everyone’s sons, he proposes that Joe and each member of the audience should be in a
kind of generalized care for all of the sons and daughters in the world. Miller later wrote that he wanted the play to be about "unrelatedness," describing Joe as a man who "cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." (Cambridge 53) The admission that the pilots were "all my sons" is, for Joe, an admission that he might as well have killed Larry himself. The admission is also a new understanding that it should not matter whether the dead pilots could have been his sons; rather, understanding the obligation to society to value everyone's sons as though they were our own. Whether that level of concern is possible or feasible, indeed whether it is healthy to refuse to help your own children and neighbors while you try to help the whole world, is a different question. An idealist, especially an uncompromising one, might give it a try, and commit suicide if and when he failed to do so.

"The suicide poses another dilemma that makes the play appear more melodramatic than tragic," Terry Otten says. "Although we witness Keller's guilt throughout and Miller points clearly to the death it inevitably leads to, the suicide's motivation and ultimate meaning remain obscure." (Otten 18) Joe's death could be self-judgment or escape. Is the death an action of "self-purification" as Stanosh Bhatia suggests, or does it merely "serve the function of a well-made plot without possessing the psychological or mythic authority of a modern tragedy?" (Otten 18)

The tension among these values is highlighted throughout the play in Joe's and Chris's conflicting moralities. For Joe, there is nothing more important in this world than the family. For Chris, the destruction of the war wrought a new "kind of—responsibility. Man for man." (Otten 24) And in the play, Joe's morality actually outshines Chris's, even though Miller is giving the audience a chance at accepting Chris's "socialist utopia"
argument. In the end, what draws audiences is the emotion of a comprehensible, identifiable unit of society — the family. Miller’s “unrelatedness” argument is defeated by the reader and audience caring more about the one son whose father they see before and with whom the identify, than the twenty-one dead sons left off stage.

The disillusionment of the child towards the parent led to Larry’s suicide, and this disillusionment can be traced through Chris, who becomes disenchanted with his family, society and himself by realizing that none are as moral as he once believed. When he finally finds out his father is guilty of knowingly shipping out the cracked cylinder heads, he says “What the hell are you? You’re not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?” (All My Sons 70-71) This is the point where Chris becomes disillusioned and even suicidal, finding it easier to take his own life than kill his own father. His father is guilty of the crime, and his mother is guilty of hiding the information. Both the crime and the cover-up are equally bad in Chris’ mind. He believes that his father is worse than an animal and is disgusted that he has lived with his parents since the crime happened. He feels that if even his parents are capable of such a thing, then society must be the same or worse, because he tells his father that he once believed him to be better than most men.

At the end of the play, Chris’ realization brings remorse when Joe commits suicide. “But Joe’s suicide does not completely clear the air; it seems more a gesture demanded by Chris — not an expiation of the crime — and Chris himself realizes this too late.” (Brater 40) Joe’s suicide does not kill his remaining son, but Chris will be considering his father’s and brother’s deaths for years to come, even with his mother telling him “Forget now. Live.” (All My Sons 84)
Miller later uses the everyman to criticize a zealous following of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*. And in both cases, the American Dream leads to the suicide of the dreamer for the benefit of his wife and sons. “Unlike *Death of a Salesman*, in which Willy’s death projects an intended artistic ambiguity, in *All My Sons* the suicide ends in near equivocation as escape or suicide, rather than being either both or neither.” (Otten 19)

**Death of a Salesman “What is this supposed to do, make a hero out of you?”**

Miller’s most popular play is arguably *Death of a Salesman*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949. In the play, the “action outlines the mental and moral collapse, leading to suicide, of an aging traveling salesman, who comes to realize that he had based his life on false ideals.” (Martine 23). “The American dream and its delusions are everywhere” (Helterman 92) throughout the play, pointing to the fact that reality pales in comparison to one’s hopes and dreams.

*Death of a Salesman* possesses many elements common with *All My Sons*. Both the inner circle of the family and the outer circle of society are strongly connected. However, in *Salesman* the action is firmly rooted in the familial arena; man’s social responsibility is not considered at all. *Salesman* tells the story of Willy Loman confronting failure in a success-driven society. Willy spent his life striving for the “American Dream” of success and superior status but, instead, reaped failure. Miller describes *Salesman* as “a slippery play to categorize because nobody in it stops to make a speech objectively stating the great issues which I believe it embodies.” (*Theater Essays* 145)
Miller mixes the tragic hero with the mundane American citizen during a time when America was defining success in the world. The result is anti-hero Willy, a simple salesman and father who constantly aspires to become “great.” But Willy’s career as a salesman is winding down and he is in his final days, considering himself to be a failure but incapable of consciously admitting as such. The drama of the play lies not in its events and flashbacks, but in Willy’s deluded perception and recollection of them as the audience witnesses the tragic demise of a helpless yet spirited man.

Willy’s lack of awareness fueled the tragedy of his suicide. Miller went back to Greek tragedy, and the tragedy of Oedipus, in explaining Salesman. Oedipus was not to blame for marrying his mother, as he did so unknowingly. He is not really at fault, but his awareness only goes up to a point, and his guilt takes over. “Now he is inconsolable and must tear out his eyes,” Miller says. “What is tragic about this? Why is it not even ridiculous? How can we respect a man who goes to such extremities over something he could in no way help or prevent?” The audience does not respect Oedipus, but it respects the Law he unknowingly broke that defines people and society. Confused critics did not see that Willy Loman had broken the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live. The existence of this law is not a comfort or civilizing statute, but a belief that raises anxieties when questioned. (Theater Essays 149)

Willy can be seen as either a pathetic figure or a tragic one. Pathetic figures are victims of circumstance, while a tragic hero is tragic because of the choices made. While Willy is a victim of the circumstances of his age and his inability to fit into a new world, he does make the choice to commit suicide in the hopes that leaving $20,000 will be a great victory over circumstances. From Willy’s perspective it is an act of love, intended
to redeem his family. Joe also intended to redeem his family, by letting the rest of them, even Ann, “off the hook” for his crime. Crashing the car is intended as a gesture of the hero’s victory over circumstances. The exhausted, idealistic man who has visions of a great future for his sons does not in the end come to terms with reality, but retains his hopes. To Willy, his death is the only choice. This makes him more tragic than pathetic, even though his inability to articulate his feelings can mix the two up.

In a discussion between Arthur Miller and Dustin Hoffman during a filming of a television production of *Salesman*, Miller explains that Willy sees Biff weeping and begging for forgiveness. That feeds into Willy’s idea that Biff is going to be fantastic. “I can give him the key to the city,” the key being the insurance, Miller explains to Hoffman. “I can’t believe my plan worked out. It’s really happening.” All the little behavior does not matter. Biff’s tears are what carry Willy out of the door to his car and death. *(Private Conversations)*

In the “Private Conversations” documentary, Miller described *Salesman* as a “play about the impossible situation about being alive.” And that impossible situation can make the man who dreamed of being self-made turn to self-destruction.

Despite the strength in the death of Willy being shown and not told, Miller needed to explain to his audience his intent of telling the story. He could end the play with the sound of Willy’s car crashing, but instead closes *Salesman* at Willy’s grave. “The chorus-like effect of the ‘Requiem’ obviously related to Miller’s conscious effort to write a tragedy of ‘the common man,’ a drama which places man in his full social context, which in his essay ‘On Social Plays’ is so clearly associated in Miller’s mind with Greek Drama.” (Martin 40)
Even though Willy is losing control of his mental faculties, he understands his current situation. He was fired by Howard, his pride stops him from another job with Charlie, and there is little he will be able to do now. And he cannot survive on a little salary, as Bernard points out. He has enough awareness of his surroundings to know what he is doing, if not realize how his family will react. Linda, Biff and Happy know enough that Willy deliberately took his own life, although they are lost as to why. They did not see Willy talking to his dead brother Ben. Linda thinks it is about the house payments, while Biff says he had the wrong dreams. Happy becomes more confident he can become successful at his store, perhaps through harder work than simple charm, but that has little to do with Willy’s death. Charlie says Willy probably felt he could do no more as a salesman, and could not even dream anymore. The $20,000 of insurance money Willy saw as his family’s rescue is not mentioned.

“The image of a suicide so mixed in motive as to be unfathomable and yet demanding statement,” Miller says, explaining how *Salesman* came from simple images. “Revenge was in it and a power of love, a victory in it that would bequeath a fortune to the living and a flight from emptiness. With it an image of peace at the final curtain, the peace that is between wars, the peace leaving the issues above found and viable yet.” *(Theater Essays 142-143)* Miller’s addition of the Requiem adds extra motives to Willy’s suicide as well. Willy is a man of a near-religious belief in his own concept of material and financial success, which he has strongly attempted to instill into his grown sons, Biff and Happy. Willy sees personality and a smile as a key to being “well-liked,” and has fostered this gaudy and ornate philosophy onto his sons. Willy thought his sons could be successful simply because they were good-looking and had personality. But
Happy is a frustrated playboy and Biff is a wanderer and a thief. Biff’s frustration and sadness seems to come from catching Willy with another woman in Boston some years ago, which shattered both Biff’s opinion of his father and himself.

While Willy ends the play committing suicide by crashing his car, the audience learns he has been attempting, or at least contemplating the act before the play begins. A rubber hose line is attached to the gas main in Willy’s house, allowing him to inhale the gas. The Lomans do not have a garage so Willy can attach it to the exhaust of his car. This is Willy’s wish for an escape from the realities of life, although if he is doing it in his more lucid moments is unknown. Willy could have some modicum of selflessness and not wish Linda to have to take care of a senile old man, while also having the perceived “self-respect” to avoid becoming a burden on her. While Willy’s world revolves around himself and his sons, the love Willy has for Linda “putting up with him” is there. The loss of his job and his failure to succeed also means Willy thinks he has no right to live. The hose also represents grief and deception over Willy’s suicidal tendencies. Linda is distraught over the hose’s purpose. The deceptive nature of the hose is apparent when Willy is confronted about it by Biff and Willy denies its existence.

When confronting Willy over the rubber hose, Biff exclaims “What is this supposed to do, make a hero out of you?” (Portable Arthur Miller 123) Exactly how this will make Willy a “hero” is dropped as Biff jumps subjects (he is understandably upset) to saying he wishes to be an ordinary person. Biff attempts to explain that he is not the man of Willy’s dreams and that he wishes to be free from them. Regardless of what Willy repeatedly shouts about spite, this is not vengeful behavior over Biff finding another woman in his father’s hotel room; Biff genuinely does not want the life of a
A “dime a dozen” is not really an insult in Biff’s own eyes, and Willy is misunderstanding the meaning. Biff may see himself as a “nothing” compared to whatever great potential Willy believed in, but Willy sees himself and Biff as people who are not a “dime a dozen.” Willy is holding on to his own personal dignity as best he can.

Biff attempts to communicate his insight to Willy, but his love for his father and his own despair causes him to cry on Willy’s shoulders. Exalted at the revelation of his son’s feelings and boosted by Linda and Happy, Willy again prepares to give him the opportunity for greatness that he stubbornly believes Biff can have. After trying to kill himself before the play starts, Willy now thinks his death will be the start of something great, not the end of a pathetic failure. Not willing to do anything by half-measures, Willy roars his car into the night to commit suicide, and so provide Biff with $20,000 of insurance money as the means for regeneration. “Willy views the final act of his life as both atonement for past failures and an affirmation of his ideals and love.” (Nelson 106)

Willy feels if Biff was unsuccessful then he had failed him because anyone who is good-looking and well-liked can achieve the American Dream and therefore be successful. Willy feels that Biff deliberately fails in order to spite Willy, ruining his own life out of anger for seeing the Woman in Willy’s hotel room. Biff gives some credence to this, saying “There’s no spite in it anymore,” (Portable Arthur Miller 125) implying there once was spite in his actions. But Biff does say not everything is Willy’s fault for his affair with the Woman, but more about Biff’s inability to take orders or climb the corporate ladder.

Although the American Dream promises financial security, Willy is unable to make enough money to pay his bills let alone afford the “diamonds” he imagines his
brother speaking about. Willy did not make great money as a salesman; therefore, he had no legacy to pass on to his sons. Willy feels he must, symbolically, trade his own life for his family’s wellbeing, whereby they will hopefully experience a life of greatness without Willy being present. This is the action of a loving father instead of a salesman, even if Willy sees the money as more important than his own life. The emphasis Willy puts on financial success prevents him from realizing the consequences that his suicide would create, and the confusion it leaves for his friend Charley, his sons, and his wife.

Sociology professor Paul Bloomberg saw Willy Loman as the alienated white collar worker. The way Howard ignores and dismisses Willy, and Charley saying how Willy did not provide a physical or social service supports this.

Willy, a poor victim of the single-minded allegiance to false and hollow value of material success, allows what is most uniquely his, his personality, to be molded, transformed and vulgarized in accordance with what he believes other expect of him. Worse yet, the self-hatred eating at his soul because of his failure to achieve these goals leads him to destroy his previous and once warm relationship with his sons, and finally leads to his own self-destruction. Long before Willy’s physical suicide, his self-hatred has brought him to spiritual suicide, and his is only temporarily sustained in his growing madness, and he is only temporarily sustained in his growing madness by his transparent self-deception and dreams of successes past and false illusions of successes future. (Lerner 125)

“Joe Keller and Willy Loman are both consenting victims, men who attach themselves to images which their society has created and called good.” (Corrigan 134)

The American images of the successful businessman and his family become overpowering forces on both Joe and Willy, although Joe achieved success and is not driven to madness by those images. But in both cases, it is the rebellions of the sons that lead the fathers to self-destruction, even though the sons do not wish harm, but freedom.
The reasons for Willy’s suicide are clear to the audience, if not his family. Critics maintain that Keller’s motivations for suicide remain obscure.

II. Crucible and Bridge: The Name Searchers

The Crucible: “Leave me my name!”

Another Miller play that remains popular to this day is The Crucible (1953). The Crucible is a re-telling of the McCarthy-era “red scare” after World War II, when there were near-hysterical fears of Communist spies and infiltrators in the United States. Based on historical accounts, the play is set during the 1692 Salem Witchcraft Trials when several young girls accuse innocent town members of witchcraft to avoid getting into trouble for entertaining ideas of witchery themselves. The central protagonist, John Proctor, confesses an earlier adultery with the girls’ ringleader, Abigail. Proctor wishes to save his own wife from being hanged based upon charges brought by his former lover. Because his wife, Elizabeth, lies about the adultery to save his name, the judges fail to believe his charges. Proctor is given the chance to save his own life by confessing to witchery, but chooses to be hanged, committing suicide by proxy, rather than betray his friends and neighbors and disgrace his name any further.

Miller used the actual history of the Salem Witch Trials as his basis for The Crucible, and history states that John Proctor was hanged for practicing witchcraft. Miller had history itself on his side and Proctor would die by the end of the play. Using his own sense of artistic license, Miller made Proctor a farmer in his mid 30s, and a character willing to die for his beliefs after intense self-scrutiny. Miller again wanted to look at the relationship between the individual and society, in this case the small society
of Salem. In turning Proctor into his own character, Miller turned the farmer into a playful, poetic and imaginative figure, remarkably different from the much more serious and straightforward characters in the play. This makes him a dangerous man in a community like Salem.

Proctor speaks in a non-literal sense, shown when Elizabeth wonders if Proctor is over Abigail. “An everlasting funeral marches around your heart,” he tells her. When he learns of Elizabeth being accused of witchcraft, more severe metaphors are issued. Miller gives Proctor a poetic sense of self in the dialogue that leads to Proctor’s realization there is no point to his life without his name. Beforehand, he tells Elizabeth he only keeps silent out of spite and considers giving a false confession to save his own life. “Nothing’s spoiled by giving them this lie that were not rotten long before.”

(Portable Arthur Miller 244)

Proctor sees how other people, respected people, are refusing to falsely confess to save their own lives. To Proctor, his name is everything he is as a human being. He cannot give up his name to save his own life at the cost of those who died with their names, especially if it will support the corrupt theocracy. Proctor falsely confesses to witchcraft, but stops at indicting others. He does not want to “name names,” an obvious lie, as Proctor knew those executed were innocent. And he does not want his signed confession nailed to the door of the church for all to see.

“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave my name!”

(Portable Arthur Miller 250) Through his name and love for his family, Proctor is able to
regain power over himself by declaring he will not have his name used to give a court of hysteria more power. "Beyond anything else, *The Crucible* is a study in power and the mechanism by which power is sustained, challenged and lost," Bigsby says. (Bigsby 150)

The theocracy has power over Salem, Abigail and the other girls gain power through declaring people witches, and the madness of the trials break the power of the theocracy.

John Proctor feels powerless by his guilt over his affair with Abigail to speak out against her. When he finally gains the courage to speak, it is too late. John Hale had power in his name as a witch-hunting specialist, only to become disillusioned and humbled, pleading with the prisoners to save their lives by making false confessions. When Hale asks Elizabeth to counsel Proctor to lie and save his life, she agrees to see him. Alone with Proctor, Elizabeth forgives him for being unfaithful and blames herself for not being able to love him enough. "It takes a cold wife to promote lechery," she confesses, and her own lies to deny that lechery before the court led to Proctor's arrest. She cannot tell him to lie and instead says "Do what you will. But let none be your judge. There be no higher judge under Heaven than Proctor is!" (Portable Arthur Miller 245)

As Proctor and Rebecca Nurse are led to be hung, Hale begs Elizabeth to plead with Proctor to save himself, but Elizabeth cries, "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!" (Portable Arthur Miller 252)

Did Proctor commit suicide? He told the truth and others hung him. Within the realms of his character as established by Miller, there was no way he could have chosen differently. Proctor is enlightened and humbled by the importance of his own name and his own honor, although he earlier gave into his anger and shouted "God is dead!" (Collected Plays 230) Proctor’s rage with the travesty of justice he witnesses is
understandable, but he lost his temper with unreasonable people whipped into a religious and paranoid frenzy. And he knows he bears some blame by having the affair with Abigail that stirred her hatred for Elizabeth and by not denouncing Abigail by admitting the affair earlier. This shame and guilt prevents him from seeing himself as innocent as the others falsely accused, but his refusal to betray others lets him see his goodness.

Robert Warshow wrote a strong criticism of *The Crucible* for a 1953 issue of *Commentary*, saying Miller had missed the point of the Puritan experience. Warshow comments that the victims of Salem chose to die "for their own credit on earth and in heaven... they lived in a universe where each man was saved or damned by himself, and happened to them was personal." (Nelson 149) Miller clarifies that those who chose to hang rather than falsely confess die in their own states of grace. They know they are being unjustly punished for unreal crimes under an unfair court. But Miller did not intend to create a look back at Salem's history, but rather a look at the power hysteria can have on a society.

To what degree Proctor believes in Heaven and Hell is vague. He does not go to church when Reverend Parris talks about fire and damnation, and he does not "see the light of God" in Parris' gold candlesticks. Proctor eventually sees his name as having real power. "And as protagonist of *The Crucible*, even if he is not heavenly oriented, he most certainly dies for his own 'credit on earth' and his salvation or damnation is decisively 'personal.'" (Nelson 150) Proctor makes his own personal choices, and neither God nor the Devil fit into the equation. Even if others in Salem believe he is not a witch, he knows he cannot sign his name to a lie that would condemn others, and quickly renounces his confession even if it means his death.
Proctor, who has set himself outside Salem and the law, cannot accept martyrdom at first: he does not see himself as fit to die with Rebecca Nurse as a wronged innocent condemned out of private vengeance. “There is no final assurance that he is worthy, either in his sacrificial defense of the innocent before the court or in Elizabeth’s assumption of responsibility of his sin. The ultimate verdict of the play, then, is to be Proctor’s decision about his own state of soul.” (Porter 96)

Proctor does find his soul within himself, through the discovery that Judge Danforth intends to publish his confession. Proctor will neither implicate others in his “crime,” nor allow Danforth to use his name to justify their deaths. When he discovers that he cannot concur in their legal lie, he is able to absolve himself and so die for his convictions.

The Crucible can be seen as contrasting the exterior reality of the Salem trials with the interior torments of Proctor over his adultery. Once Elizabeth forgives Proctor, he can make his own decision, and he chooses his name and his death. “So the trials that matters, in dramatic terms, have been within John Proctor, the one without has been just metaphor.” (Porter 108)

In his epilogue, Miller insists that sacrifices like Proctor’s eventually gain a relationship to the whole community. In March 1712, the excommunications were rescinded and the power of the theocracy in Massachusetts was broken. (Collected Plays 253)

“You have your magic now, for now I think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor. Not enough to weave a banner with, but white enough to keep it from such dogs.” (Portable Arthur Miller 251) Proctor knows his goodness, something he did not
know earlier.

“This epiphany satisfies the exigencies of the structure; Proctor does to his death purged of guilt and seeing meaning in his sacrifice,” notes critic Thomas Porter. (Porter 96) Joe Keller also sees his death as a way to purge guilt and achieve a meaningful sacrifice. After finding out Larry committed suicide because of his actions, Joe is crushed with grief and guilt he had ignored or justified. Joe’s own suicide enables him to escape that guilt, as well as enable Chris and Ann to live their lives. Both Proctor and Joe make the choices they know will end their lives: Joe in putting “a bullet in his head” as promised and Proctor ripping up his confession.

Joe and Proctor’s crimes were committed with risks they understood and other risks they did not see. Proctor’s affair with Abigail was wrong, but he had no idea Abigail would hate Elizabeth enough to turn to drinking charms and planting evidence; in comparison, Joe knew it was possible the cracked cylinders might cause airplanes to crash. In the calculated risks of their crimes, Proctor was only gambling his marriage and social status if his affair with Abigail was revealed, while Joe knew by shipping defective cylinders he was risking his freedom and his family. By not shipping the cylinders, Joe also thought he was risking his family, and that outweighed any other concerns.

Compared to Willy Loman, John Proctor is much more aware and conscious of everything going around him. Proctor can be seen as figure of clarity and resolve instead of mystery and confusion, which can be considered ironic, given the religious nature of Salem’s theocracy is steeped in the mystery and confusion of what God wants of Man. Willy, obsessed with the materialistic, is trapped by his inability to really understand himself and the world. Proctor, concerned with his place in the world, gains his
understanding of himself and the better nature he had feared as lost. “If Willy Loman is a tragic figure, his tragedy is necessarily and unmistakably laced with pathos. There is nothing false about this because the pathos is genuine and moving. Proctor’s tragedy lacks this pathos because he is a character of much greater consciousness than Willy. He is able to stand outside himself while Willy is not; therefore his drama is considerably removed from the anguished subjectivity of *Death of a Salesman.*” (Nelson 173)

Proctor is tormented, but he is able to break free of his torment even if it means his own death for a clear purpose Elizabeth understands. By comparison, Linda cannot understand Willy’s death and does not know what he was trying to accomplish.

*A View from the Bridge: “Give me my name, Marco!”*

The next major play, *A View from the Bridge* (1955), which Miller later expanded into two acts for both time and secondary character development, features Brooklyn longshoreman Eddie Carbone. Eddie and his wife have raised their niece, Catherine, to adulthood, but Eddie has a hard time seeing Catherine as a grown-up who will eventually leave his home. He also harbors subconscious sexual feelings for her which he is blind to. The family takes in two illegal Italian immigrants, Marco and Rudolpho. Catherine falls in love with the dashing Rudolpho. Eddie begins to hate Rudolpho, and breaks the strongest neighborhood code by calling immigration authorities. While being arrested, Marco accuses Eddie of being a “rat,” infuriating Eddie. Later, Marco and Eddie fight, and Marco kills Eddie with his own knife. A dying Eddie cries in regret in the arms of his wife, Beatrice.

Sidney Lumet directed a movie adaptation of the play, called *Vu du Pont* in
1962. That adaptation ends with a fight between Marco and Eddie with longshoreman’s hooks. Eddie kills himself with a longshoreman’s hook after the fight. Eddie still dies from the consequences of his choices and actions, but the death is specifically a suicide in front of the neighborhood and family he had betrayed.

In the period between *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*, Miller’s view of Greek tragedies had changed. He saw them as more than cautionary tales, where the past intrudes on the present almost by accident, as he had written as in *Sons* and *Salesman*. Many Greek tragedies end with a dramatic suicide. “They must have had their therapeutic effect by raising to conscious awareness the clan’s capacity for brutal and unredeemed violence so that it could be sublimated and contained by new institutions, like the law Athena brings to tame the primordial, chainlike vendetta,” as Miller writes. (*Cambridge* 342)

Martin Gottfried, an unofficial biographer for Miller, explains how *A View from the Bridge* was rewritten and modified after it failed on Broadway. Miller rearranged *Bridge* “to be accessible in the manner of *All My Sons* and in London the strategy worked.” Miller wrote a new version for the London stage and received rave reviews. He enlarged the characters of Beatrice and Catherine, giving them a greater role in Eddie’s fate. Catherine is not a Lolita-like flirt, but she does light Eddie’s cigar in the revision, which conveys Freudian overtones to the audience. Miller also changed the dialogue from opera-like verse to prose. The final scene was altered to have Eddie dying in the arms of his Beatrice, as a form of reconciliation, after Marco stabs him. “To Miller this ending moved Eddie’s death closer to being a suicide, but it fails fully to resolve the question of whether or not Eddie acts in self-awareness.” (Otten 85) Eddie crying out to
Beatrice as he dies could be seen as reconciliation, but Eddie has acted with irrational passion for so long, and he does not confess nor discover his true culpability in his final moments, Otten states.

Miller altered *Bridge* again with the help of British director Peter Brook for the Paris production. “This time the director suggested suiting the play to a French audience. Since they—or so he believed—appreciated suicides as curtain scenes, Eddie Carbone was rewritten to finally grasp his passion for Catherine and kill himself in shame.” (Gottfried 306) This ending was used by Sidney Lumet in his 1962 film version of *Bridge*, with Eddie using the longshoreman hook to kill himself. While Eddie committing suicide may be the most dramatically satisfying ending with Eddie fully understanding his motives before taking his own life to repent in an “Old World” fashion, Miller chose to publish the London edition, his vision of the ending, with Marco killing Eddie, both their hands on the knife.

The main thrust of *A View from the Bridge* is another tragedy of the common man, a longshoreman more robust but also more humble than Willy Loman, with Willy’s same lack of self-knowledge. In this case, Miller goes even closer to the tragedies of old with a Greek Chorus character in the lawyer, Alfieri. The “chorus” even speaks as a character, trying to warn them away from their grizzly fates, while speaking to the audience to put the events in the past tense. Alfieri interacts with Eddie, the tragic hero who dies from his own knife, and Marco, the character who demands Old World justice from Eddie and is able to turn Eddie’s knife back around on him. Alfieri tries but fails to steer Eddie and Marco away from desperate action.

The pure intensity of Eddie’s need clouds his judgment and even his survival
instinct. As with Joe and Willy, Eddie’s need blocks his view of reality. Proctor also hoped he could block reality, but underestimates the actions of Abigail and the other Salem girls. Eddie does not appear as deluded as Willy, but he does not seem to be fooling anyone by his words near the end of the play. Eddie’s immediate family knows he called immigration

_Bridge_ grew out of a story Miller heard on the Brooklyn waterfront, about a man who turned in two illegal immigrants so one would not marry the man’s niece. Miller noted that “the secret of Greek drama is the vendetta, the family ties incomprehensible to Englishmen and Americans… Much that has been interpreted in loftier terms [of] fate, religion, etc., is only blood and tribal survival within the family… Red Hook is full of Greek tragedies.” (Gottfried 120) And like a Greek tragedy, this tale ends with a man’s death, fighting a foe he cannot defeat.

But Miller’s characters cannot walk away. “Like Proctor, [Eddie] will die for his name and, like Joe Keller, he has been betrayed by the law of his own nature into breaking the law of his duty to humanity. He has violated the accepted mores of his people out of a necessity created by an illegitimate passion.” (Hayman 83) By breaking rules of society, even a small society, the tragedy is created. In the case of Eddie, he breaks the rule by calling the authorities on Marco and Rudolpho to separate Rudolpho and Catherine, risking becoming a pariah among the neighborhood. Even though Eddie knows he is guilty, he struggles to avoid becoming a pariah by declaring Marco a liar. He even more shocked by Beatrice calling him an incestuous pervert when she exclaims “You can never have her!” regarding his feelings for Catherine. (_View from the Bridge_ 83)
Miller plays are often about individuals and their connection to their family and society, and the death that comes when those connections are broken. Joe commits suicide when he realizes the societal connection, and Willy commits suicide when he sees his connection to Biff as restored. Eddie's love for his niece, Catharine, and his inability to recognize that the love has moved from paternal to sexual causes him to break his connection to his neighborhood, and blinds himself to thinking anyone would realize what he had done. As Catherine is not a blood relation, there are only technically no "incestuous" feelings, but Eddie is disgusted by any idea of "too much love" or lust towards Catherine. When Beatrice and Alfieri hint as such so Eddie can at least recognize his true motives, Eddie is angry they would consider him that type of person. He is even more shocked at the idea of informing so Rudolpho will be out of the picture, but becomes that very type of person. Alfieri explains even those who believe Eddie's claims Rudolpho really is only marrying Catherine to stay in the country, or even that Rudolpho is a homosexual, would be horrified by Eddie breaking the prime directive of Red Hook. From the "Old World" laws that Marco still follows, death is the only available repentance or punishment.

In the first act, Eddie finds no satisfaction in the clinical "New World" laws, designed to avoid passionate emotions in order to work. By the second act, he uses them in an effort to prevent the loss of Catherine, while simultaneously betraying the "Old World" laws that prize and preserve the love he is seeking. Taking sexual desire out of the matter, Eddie's conscious objective is to keep Catherine safe and protect her. So, the unconscious mind is the element of Eddie's motivation.

Eddie's twisting of natural law, American law and Sicilian law destroys him
through his betrayal of honor. "Eddie stands alone as a man who has lost his respect. In betraying the brothers he betrays himself and his cry is futile, as his appalled wife knows and accepts." (Corrigan 40) Eddie goes berserk after Marco "makes a rag" of his name, acting like Marco is lying when it is clear to everyone Marco is telling the truth. In return, Marco is certain the only proper response to this betrayal is death. "The animals attack each other (it is Miller's image); the law of blood in Red Hook exerts itself; Marco turns Eddie's knife back into its owner; the logic of his death is exactly within ancient law." (Corrigan 41)

Most of Miller's heroes are not intellectuals, and a regular Red Hook longshoreman like Eddie is no exception. While Proctor in *The Crucible* possessed a sense of self-awareness that can be considered poetic, that could be excused by the historical setting. Eddie is a modern day man who is unaware and inarticulate. He is not expected to deliberately end his own life in a heroic quest for honor. But Eddie's passions makes him willing to risk his life and lose it, stabbed while still holding his knife, to regain his name among his neighborhood peers.

"Eddie Carbone is a tragic figure, Miller clearly feels, because in the intransigence of his action there is an implicit fidelity to the self, integrity to one's own beliefs no matter how perverse they may be. However wrong he may have been, and Alfieri is not unmindful of Eddie's tragic deed, Eddie nonetheless pursues what he regards as a proper course of action." (Nagel 115) This proper course of action results in Eddie, in a near animalistic rage, demanding Marco return his name. Marco, knowing Eddie denied him a chance to feed his children, is also enraged. Eddie goes to his own death in confronting Marco, who is established as the stronger of the two throughout the
play. Eddie is well aware that Marco is stronger and seems aware he is confronting an opponent he has no chance of defeating, which suggests a suicidal intent.

As Christopher Bigsby explains, Eddie’s primitive instincts of survival are deferred to his own passions and obsessions. These passions lift him above the others in Red Hook that settle for “half.” Whatever Miller felt for informers, he is not giving his own take on the subject in Bridge. Eddie’s informing is not a necessary social or moral act. “He does not inform out of weakness, but out of intensity to his need.” (Bigsby 185)

“As ever in Miller’s plays, the real question is what happens when it is impossible to walk away.” (Bigsby 187) Bridge is a tragedy about human passion, a breach in the notion of order, a breach which must be closed by death. A very Greek situation is created out of fate and passion. Eddie’s passion blinds him to what that passion really is. His desire to protect Catherine from Rudolpho is really a cover for his own sexual desire for her, something he is unable to admit. Miller is aware of Eddie’s moral flaw, but he does not want the audience to ignore Eddie’s essential humanity. The natural love Eddie has for a young woman he raised like a daughter has changed to an unswerving obsession, leading to him breaking the neighborhood rule to “protect” her. Alfieri and Miller admire the purity of Eddie’s emotions, not the rightness and wrongness of them. Miller rewrote the epilogue of the play to make it clear that Eddie was not an animal, as Marco called him, but a man driven to self-sacrifice for his own misguided ideas of dignity and justice. Thomas Porter explains that for Eddie, “his ignorance is as invincible as his will is indomitable. That strange combination makes his doom inescapable.”

(Martin 89)

A View from the Bridge deals with a breaking of society and a breaking of the
bonds of family. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy’s death projects an intended artistic ambiguity, while in *All My Sons* the suicide ends in near equivocation as escape. However ambiguously, Willy’s death frees Biff as a representative of Willy’s own best self, and Joe Keller’s suicide will allow Chris to marry Anne and be happy. In *A View from the Bridge*, Miller changes the parental relationship to uncle and niece, with an unconscious thread of lust. Eddie suffers from a passion he can neither understand nor control: his lust for Catherine. Attempting to “save” her from Rudolpho, Eddie dies from the consequences of his choices and actions. Chris and Biff feel guilt for calling their respective fathers to a harsh judgment, while Catherine sobs “Eddie I never meant to do nothing bad to you” right before his death. (*View from the Bridge* 85)

While neither self-made nor craving wealth, Eddie Carbone is similar to Joe Keller and Willy Loman. He is the patriarch who fails as a father, and whose shortcomings affect his whole family. While Chris rejects Joe and Biff begs Willy to forget him, Eddie has no sons. Eddie sees that he worked hard on Catherine’s behalf and should be praised and rewarded: “I took food out of my own mouth to give to her.” (*Bridge* 46) Unlike Joe and Willy, Eddie’s obsession is created in his own mind and not by an unforgiving capitalist society. His tragedy affects his society, it is not caused by it.

Like Proctor, it is lust instead of greed that negatively impacts everyone around Eddie. Proctor underestimates Abigail’s hatred for Elizabeth, resulting in tragedy. Beatrice underestimates that Eddie’s lust for Catherine and hatred for Rudolpho would lead to the drastic action of calling immigration, although Alfieri tells Eddie he “won’t have a friend in the world” if he does so. Proctor is ashamed of his adultery and his hiding his sin from Salem, and struggles to find the goodness in himself that would allow
him to “mount the gibbet like a saint.” Eddie is blinded to his lust and passions, instead justifies his actions with talk of honor and responsibilities, and spurns any suggestion of forgiveness to fall on his own knife. Both Proctor and Eddie seek reconciliation with their wives before their deaths, but Eddie’s reconciliation does not expose his remorse to the audience. Porter points out that “neither Proctor nor Eddie run from their involvement; contrary judgments fall on them as they make a stand on their home ground.” (Martin 91)

Eddie Carbone joins the ranks of Miller’s men who are capable of great love and the best of intentions, but fail to recognize the erroneous impulses behind their actions. Due to flaws in their characters, they ruin their own lives and damage their families. Like his other heroes, Miller explains that Eddie “can be driven to what in the last analysis is a sacrifice of himself for his conception, however misguided, of right, dignity and justice.” (Theater Essays 166)

III. Vichy and Fall: The Dark Heart

After The Fall: “Suicide kills two people, Maggie! That’s what it’s for!”

There is a nine-year period of inactivity between A View from the Bridge and After the Fall (1964), with the only completed work the screenplay for The Misfits, starring Miller’s ex-wife Marilyn Monroe. Gerald Weales notes that Miller believed that the serious playwright has to write beyond society’s evils. “The true social drama, which he calls the ‘Whole Drama,’ must recognize that man has both a subjective and an objective existence, that he belongs not only to himself and his family, but to the world
beyond.” (Corrigan 132) The first four plays fit this idea of a Whole Drama, and Miller shifts the emphasis for *After the Fall*.

During that nine-year period Miller met Inge Morath, his third and last wife. Morath had a very personal experience with suicide. An Austrian, she had refused to join the Nazi party but was forced to do compulsory work in Berlin, and was free when Allied bombs dropped on the city. “In shock and despair, she had set out to walk to her native Salzburg, on her way climbing on to a bridge with suicide in mind.” (Bigsby 226) A German soldier on crutches saved her and she made her way home to her family. Morath eventually became a photographer, and was a set photographer for *The Misfits*.

Following their marriage, she and Miller visited Mauthausen concentration camp in 1962. Morath hoped to confront her own guilt over surviving the war, while Miller directly confronted something he had only seen from a distance. “Now he was brought face to face with the evidence of wartime depravity,” Bigsby says. “It would leave its mark on his plays.” (Bigsby 262) Monroe died of a barbiturate overdose in 1962, suspected to be a suicide, while Miller was writing his play.

*After the Fall* is a semi-autobiographical play that explores the life of a lawyer, Quentin, from his own point of view. Quentin himself does not contemplate, let alone commit suicide during the play, aside from a brief implication he intended to drown himself as a small child to spite his mother. However, two important people in his life, a client and his second wife, take their own lives. His inability to grieve for these two people, Lou and Maggie, troubles him and starts his exploration of his own capability for evil. Quentin reviews his own life, while deciding whether or not to marry his current girlfriend, Holga.
The play is an illustrated narrative, essentially a two act monologue which Quentin directs to the audience. As both the narrator and the main character, Quentin spends the play discovering betrayal and finding no one is as innocent as he once thought. The title references both the loss of innocence in the Bible’s Book of Genesis and the Albert Camus novel, *The Fall*, in which a lawyer deals with guilt and lost innocence after he does not prevent a girl from jumping to her death in a river. Miller conceded the connection, saying “The question in the play is what happens if you do go to the rescue. Does this absolve? Does this prevent the fall? Supposing he has run over the bridge where he thought he heard someone fall and has become involved with her and found that she had an inexorable lust for destruction.” (Gottfried 345) Miller concluded that *The Fall* is about trouble with women, although the theme is overshadowed by the male narrator’s concentration on ethics, particularly the dilemma of how one can ever judge another person once one has committed the sin of indifference to a stranger’s call for help. “The parallels to Quentin’s seeming indifference to Maggie’s suicide can hardly be denied, although Quentin opts to embrace the ‘absurdity’ by risking love again, whereas Camus’s Jean-Baptiste Clamence remains in his little ease.” (Otten 114)

Miller’s plays study man’s duty to society, and *After the Fall* used the Holocaust as a horrific real-world example of what happens when that duty is shirked. While Quentin explores his own life, he also looks at the world as he knows it. Despite criticism of Miller trying to sort out his own life through a play, *After the Fall* is an example of how Miller broke away from pathos into tragedy. According to Miller, pathos is “pity for a helpless victim” and that presents the audience an essentially false view of life. In contrast, tragedy, Miller explains, “must illustrate a principle of life...
Our lack of tragedy may well be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken towards the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological.” (Theater Essays 5)

In this play, Miller wanted to explore the human condition beyond a single character like Willy or Proctor. Miller wanted to see humanity as humanity, not just all of humanity in one character. In trying to see humanity, Quentin is seeing if love really does “conquer all.” This has little to do with suicide and sacrifice, but does deal with guilt and responsibility.

Quentin continually explores these ideas of guilt and responsibility, which is seen in black and white terms, a characteristic of Miller. Quentin is examining his life to see if he can measure up to standards almost Puritan in nature, but instead of life and death, the stakes are solitude and companionship. Quentin does not really want to spend the rest of his life by himself, but he must make peace with his own history, and the history of the world, in order to move forward.

The two supporting characters that commit suicide are Quentin’s second wife, Maggie, and his friend and mentor, Lou. Quentin’s reaction, as well as lack of reaction, to these deaths drive forward his intense self-scrutiny, and the wonder if maybe the “problem” is with humanity itself rather than just him. It can be hard to say if Quentin is looking past his own problems or if he is shirking responsibility again by saying it is more humanity’s fault than his own.

Quentin’s dilemma to defend Lou or not is caused by Quentin’s search for an innocent person. Lou admits that in the original copy of a book he wrote, he suppressed evidence that would make Communism look unfavorable. Mickey, a character similar to
theater director and Miller’s friend Elia Kazan, says Lou probably did this on Elsie’s influence rather than a passion for the Communist cause. Elsie is Lou’s wife. Mickey wants to confess everything before the Committee, understood as House Un-American Activities Committee, as he feels a noble stance against the world’s injustice was subverted by the Russians. Lou is visibly shaken at this.

“Quentin’s readiness to judge others is reiterated by several characters in the play, including himself, yet on all these issues he takes no steps to satisfy himself and passes no explicit judgment. Psychologically explicable as this may be, dramatically it requires more clarification than Miller gives us.” (Welland 96)

After Quentin accidentally meets Maggie, he forgets a crucial meeting at his law firm about defending Lou before the Committee. Then the phone rings, and he learns Lou has killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train. “The news about Lou’s death destroys any illusion we—or Quentin—might hold of (Quentin’s) innocence.” (Otten 121) In the present, Quentin wonders why Lou should have died. Quentin’s first wife Louise does not think Lou committed suicide, while Quentin says in the present “Lou knew himself! He knew where he stood! … Maybe it’s not enough—to know yourself. Or maybe it’s too much.” (Portable Arthur Miller 310) Quentin believes Lou died because he felt he did not have a friend in the world, he had become separated from everyone.

“It was dreadful because I was not his friend either, and he knew it,” Quentin says “I’d have stuck it to the end, but I hated the danger in it for myself, and he saw through my faithlessness… Because I wanted out, to be a good American again, kosher again—and proved it in the joy… the joy… the joy I felt now that my danger had spilled all over the subway track!” (Portable Arthur Miller 310)
Lou’s death seems to exist only to let Quentin off the hook, so he does not get a bad reputation for trying to defend a suspected communist. Quentin feels relieved by Lou’s suicide; he does not have to risk his career by defending a “Red.” This relief quickly leads to guilt. “That Lou’s suicide should relieve Quentin of the necessity for a painful moral decision is, like Maggie’s suicide, in line with the play’s recurrent suggestion that Quentin is in some ways the man who had all the luck—his problems are removed before he has to solve them—but the guilt is more oppressive because of that.” (Welland 95) Nevertheless, Lou’s suicide tends to look more like a trick of dramatic convenience, and Mickey’s disappearance from the play unfortunately reinforces this impression.

Although Quentin agonizes over the issue of Lou, he never seems to be deeply involved in the issue. Like Maggie, Lou is dishonest, weak, and a suicide. The supposed “ubiquity of guilt” Quentin speaks of renders both partners in both couples equally culpable.

The joy Quentin felt over Lou’s death, thus freeing Quentin from having to defend him, plays into Quentin’s dilemma of wondering if he is a good man in any way. “There are nonactions, and we have… a literal blood connection with the evil all the time,” Miller explains, meaning fault in what we allow as well as for what we do ourselves. “In this respect, Quentin shares in the offense of Jean-Baptiste Clamnece, Camus’s cunning antihero, whose innocence is violated by the suicide of another, an act in which he participates by virtue of not acting, just as Quentin bears responsibility for Maggie’s death.” (Otten 112)
The influence of society on the individual is explored again in the play. “It is clear in *After the Fall* that much of Maggie’s behavior is the result of her doing what is expected of her, and that Louise sees herself and Quentin in the roles that her psychoanalysis insists that they play,” Weales says. “In the political subplot, Mickey testifies and names names partly because his new affluence requires that he should, and Lou, who makes a John Proctor-refusal, admits that in the past he has compromised his sense of his own honesty, tailored himself to fit Party requirements.” (Corrigan 137-138)

The character of Maggie is an interesting one, and perhaps the reason *After the Fall* was highly controversial among critics and audiences when it was first performed. Many disliked what they saw as the dismantling of the myth of Marilyn Monroe only about a year and a half after her death. “People do not take kindly to the destruction of their myths, nor, indeed, to the insistence that they are myths.” (Welland 94)

As a character in the play, Maggie carries more significance than “just” representing Marilyn Monroe. It does not matter if she is “supposed” to be Monroe, but if she has stature and integrity as a character, even one that commits suicide. The controversy over the character heightens in Act II of the play when Quentin walks away from Maggie’s suicide. The claim that Miller intended Maggie to commit suicide before Monroe’s death only adds to the controversy. As Miller describes, “Maggie is in this play because she most perfectly exemplifies the self-destructiveness which finally comes when one views oneself as pure victim. And she most perfectly exemplifies this view because she comes close to being a pure victim—of parents, of a Puritanical sexual code and of her exploitation as an entertainer.” (Hofstel 195)
Quentin confuses his love for Maggie as a desire to hold dominance over her.

"The will to love never cancels out the will to wield power over the object of one’s love; and when that power comes direct by means of another’s adoration, it brings consummate temptation." (Otten 125) Any ideas of love are twisted in Quentin’s head as a kind of emotional fascism. Any attempt to save Maggie’s life would mean he would have more control over her.

No matter how autobiographical the play is or is not, the question remains if Miller is somehow trying to acquit himself of any guilt for Monroe’s death through making Quentin innocent of Maggie’s suicide. Critic David Rabe says that in Maggie, Miller treated Monroe “with more grace and dignity than anybody else ever treated her in her career or life.” (Otten 106)

Is it really Quentin’s fault, or is it the fault of humanity? But Miller does not make Quentin the perfect martyr, suffering under Maggie’s hedonism. “As he moves closer to recounting the climactic ‘last night’ with Maggie, Quentin sees the lie of his own innocence. He had wanted to wash his hands of Maggie’s self-destructive impulse, just as deep within he willed Lou’s death to free him from obligations.” (Otten 127)

Maggie and Quentin’s relationship is examined by clinical psychologist Viola Mecke, who investigates the idea of instigation in suicide. She called the conscious and unconscious dynamics at work between a suicide and a loved one as “instigation,” even though it is hard to believe that someone can be instrumental in inducing a suicidal action in others, especially a loved one or family member. “The beguiling instigator engages the self-orientation of the suicidal person that becomes an implacable, narcissistic core that propels them toward death.” (Mecke 11)
Mecke discovers an element of *After the Fall* that other critics do not notice: Quentin himself attempted suicide as a small boy, when his mother, father and older brother went off to Atlantic City without him. "When they returned, he ran into the bathroom, turned on the water, and was attempting, apparently to drown himself. His mother pleaded with him to open the door." (Mecke 77) Mecke is the only reviewer who seems to fully realize that young Quentin wished to drown himself. Although a vindictive act by a wronged child, this suicide "attempt" is well hidden, as it is revealed at the same time Quentin and Maggie struggle over her barbiturates. Quentin’s mother, Rose, tries to explain she didn’t trick him when he locks himself in the bathroom. “Quentin, why are you running water in there! I’ll die if you do that! I saw a star when you were born—a light, a light in the world!” (Portable Arthur Miller 356) She has Ike, Quentin’s father, force the door open.

Mecke explains that Quentin’s hatred of his mother colored his relationships with other women. “He is nullifying the existence of all women except his mother, with whom he was so disappointed.” With Maggie, Quentin can neither allow her to die nor let her live. Her threats of suicide enhance her power over him. “His cry to her, ‘A suicide kills two, Maggie,’ comes directly from his mother’s admonition when he ran into the bathroom, ‘If you die, I will die too.’” (Mecke 78) Young Quentin was childishly trying to gain power over his mother by drowning himself. Previous Miller characters commit suicide when they have lost power over their families, while Lou lost power over his situation with the Committee.

Maggie, a promiscuous singer who gains popularity with the public, is torn with self-hatred and an expectation of death. Miller gives very strong images of Maggie and
her emotional collapse, so “convincing, vivid and compelling” in their similarity to Monroe’s public persona that it “poisoned his play’s reception and stained his reputation in America for decades.” (Gottfied 361) The play’s producer Robert Whitehead believed Miller was willfully blind, similar to his characters, in not realizing for a while how his play could be seen as being “about” Monroe. Whitehead understood Miller was not being obtuse, but that playwrights do not always recognize the basis of what they write. “It’s almost as if you have to believe it’s something else in order to write it,” Whitehead says. (Gottfied 363) Miller expresses surprise in his autobiography Timebends that people saw Maggie as Monroe. Miller himself says that he believed Monroe was not suicidal, and she believed that alcohol and barbiturates would not seriously hurt her.

Maggie’s self-hatred and suicidal mindset exhausts Quentin. He starts to think her gasps for breath are a sign of peace for him, and that Maggie wants him to murder her, or at least be responsible for her suicide. And Quentin cannot walk away. “He wants the same adulation from his wives that he received from his mother—though it was insincere adulation to be sure.” (Mecke 79) Quentin’s first wife, Louise, wishes to be a separate person, while Maggie manipulates and provokes him. Her suicide attempts occur when Quentin can “rescue” her, as a test of his love.

In their final fight over Maggie’s pills, he lets Maggie know that suicide kills two, because that is what it is for. By removing himself from the scene, Maggie’s will no longer have a point because it will not affect Quentin any longer. “It isn’t my love you want any more. It’s my destruction. But you’re not going to kill me, Maggie.”

(Portable Arthur Miller 355) As they fight, Quentin grabs her by the neck, and then
imagines grabbing his mother by the neck. This shocks Quentin into letting go and realizing his own murderous impulses.

Through his love-hate relationship with Maggie, where both attempt to reenact prior betrayals, Quentin is an instigator, Mecke says. “He seeks the deaths of the women in his life, trying to become free of the betrayals and hatreds cast upon him through his mother’s influence. Importantly, the women in his life have been seeking an instigator. They want death for themselves. The attachment relationships that Quentin has with these women are not openly malicious until he becomes aware of his own angry, violent death-dealing desires toward them.” (Mecke 80)

Quentin goes to meet Holga, ready to commit himself once again to a personal relationship—which the audience can take as a commitment to life. During his meticulous review of his life, Quentin never contemplates ending it, but he has to make a choice to decide to live life as a human being, and not one obsessed with the ideas of innocence and guilt. In *After the Fall*, accepting one’s life is more complicated than simply recognizing that any relationship implies responsibilities on both sides. The guilt that Quentin assumes is something like Original Sin: the acceptance that he and all men have “evil in them—the capacity to kill.” (Corrigan 139)

The clearest difference between *After the Fall* and Miller’s earlier plays is the lead character does not die, either by his own hand or others. Also, the play foregoes any real semblance of reality by making the action take place inside Quentin’s head, with direct flashbacks and no solid setting. Quentin is a successful lawyer, but not obsessed with monetary wealth like Joe or Willy. He has his own sexual desires, but is not tormented by illicit lust like Proctor or blinded by sexual confusion like Eddie. The
supporting characters commit suicide, stemming from not wanting to “take it anymore” rather than a dramatic sacrifice for the sake of others. Lou is shamed by being named as a communist and writing lies about Russia. Maggie’s desire for death stems out of her own melodramatic self-loathing and a wish to hurt Quentin by making her suicide his fault.

Lou’s refusal to speak before the Committee at first seems like the same refusal Proctor makes in *The Crucible*. But John Proctor was never a witch and never saw anyone with the Devil. Lou, however, was a Communist. Lou admits to Quentin that he changed a book he was writing and filled it with lies to make Soviet law look good. Like Proctor, Lou is afraid of defending his lies. While Proctor hopes to avoid a scandal, Lou is compromising himself for a cause that is not as right as he once thought. Mickey wants to go tell the truth about how he was a Communist. When Lou starts a Proctor-like speech to Mickey about the Committee buying Mickey’s integrity, Mickey retorts that Lou has lost *his* integrity. Eventually, Lou realizes he does not have “a friend in the world” and kills himself, but that is more of a dramatic contrivance to give Quentin something to feel guilt about. The play does not linger on Lou’s death.

Lawrence Lowenthal explained that starting with *The Misfits* and continuing into *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*, “Miller’s works began to shift from the tragic perspective from man’s remediable alienation from society to man’s hopeless alienation from the universe and from himself.” The accumulated personal tragedies and international incidents “strained Miller’s faith in man’s ability to overcome social and spiritual diseases.” The expansion from the guilt of one man, like Joe, Willy, Proctor and Eddie expands into universal guilt. While one character may commit suicide as a
sacrifice or atonement, these characters were in conflict with their families or their small society. Miller began to create characters in conflict with the universe and themselves, something that cannot be fixed during the course of a play. The corruption of the human soul is no longer “conscious deviation from recognizable moral norms,” but is now “an irresistible impulse in the heart of man.” (Martin 143)

**Incident at Vichy: “It’s not your guilt I want. It’s your responsibility.”**

The final look at suicide and sacrifice is *Incident at Vichy* (1964), which is based on anecdotes Miller heard mixed with a philosophical look at guilt, fear and complicity in mankind. A group of men are being held by the Nazis in Vichy, France during World War II. As each man is brought into a room for examination by a “professor,” the characters discuss what they should do in the face of the unknown. They do not know why they have been confined and if they are going to be released, imprisoned or executed. The men include a prince, an actor, a painter, a mute old man, a young boy, a psychiatrist and a businessman, most of whom are Jewish. As each character is brought in to either be released or imprisoned, the characters discuss the situation they are in and what they can do to change it. At the end, Von Berg, an Austrian aristocrat, receives a pass allowing him to leave and live, and instead secretly gives the pass to Leduc, a French psychiatrist. Von Berg will be executed for his crime. As well as returning to the idea of sacrificing one’s self when escape is possible, Miller also looks at the concept of Anti-Semitism and the link between guilt and responsibility. *Incident at Vichy* is Miller’s first play set during World War II and is linked directly to the Holocaust, more so than *After the Fall.*
Incident at Vichy is based on the story told by an analyst friend of Miller's, Dr. Rudolph Lowenstein, who hid from the Nazis in Vichy, France in 1942. A Jewish friend of Lowenstein's was saved by a man he had never met before. This unknown man, a gentile, had substituted himself in a line of suspects waiting to have their papers inspected in a hunt for Jews. "The rumor moved down the line that this was a Gestapo operation and that the circumcised would have to produce immaculate proof of their Gentileness while the uncircumcised would of course go free," Miller says. The unknown Gentile came out with a pass for his freedom and gave it to Lowenstein's friend, who used it to escape. "He had never before laid eyes on his savior," Miller explained. "He never saw him again." (Echoes Down the Corridor 69-70) This unknown Gentile sacrificed himself for a total stranger.

The second historical fact in the play was closer to Miller. Baron Josef von Schwarzenberg, a member of an Austrian noble family and a Christian, was a close friend of Miller's third wife, Inge Morath. Von Schwarzenberg had refused to assist the Nazis and paid for it during World War II, forced to do menial labor in France. "Miller was fascinated by Von Schwarzenberg because he embodied a self-sacrificing moral integrity in the face of Fascism." (Cambridge 125)

The play attacks the concept of anti-Semitism, beyond the Nazis using it as motivation for genocide. Instead, it is seen as a reflection of how one man will always be relieved he is not part of another group. "Part of knowing who we are is knowing we are not someone else," Leduc tells Von Berg when they are the only prisoners left. "And Jew is only the name we give to that stranger, that agony we cannot feel, that death we look at like a cold abstraction. Each man has his Jew; it is the other." (Vichy 66) As with The
Crucible, a main character’s self-sacrifice is for the benefit of another and is based on a historical truth of an infamous era of injustice. As with John Proctor, Von Berg makes a bold stand against a clear injustice. Von Berg is still alive at the very end of the play, facing a German major as new prisoners are led into the room. But the implication that he will be arrested and executed for his action is obvious.

During the play, the characters argue and cajole each other to act in the face of the unknown. Each man has been pulled off the street, not sure why he has been targeted. Leduc realizes their fate and courageously argues for resistance. Von Berg speaks mournfully of the vulgarity of the Nazis and the possibility of human nobility in the face of self-interest.

Miller makes the choice facing the characters highly absorbing and the decision to fight a difficult one. All of the characters have something to lose if they attempt an escape and straightforward compliance offers some hope of release, as seen when the businessman is freed. Monceau, an actor, refuses to fight the guards because he cannot conceive of the Germans’ cruelty and the irrationality of their imprisonment. As Leduc points out to him, the Germans rely on the fact that they will silence themselves: “Your heart is conquered territory, mister,” he tells Monceau. (Incident at Vichy 52) Complicity is the main weapon of the enemy. It is only principle and faith in the nobility of man that gives the final two prisoners, the doctor and the aristocrat, a reason to fight. Von Berg eventually fights by surrendering his once chance at freedom to Leduc, fighting by sacrificing himself.

Von Berg’s decision is a heroic one, but it does not come out of nowhere. He explicitly told Leduc that he put a gun to his head and considered pulling the trigger when
the Nazis invaded Austria. “I have put a pistol to my head,” he says. “To my head!” He was aware how much his servants admired Hitler and how the Nazis were vulgar, and left his home in Austria because of it. Leduc points out that Baron Kessler, a Nazi, was Von Berg’s cousin and “in some small and frightful part” acting on Von Berg’s will. “You might have done something then, with your name and your decency, aside from shooting yourself?” (Incident at Vichy 67-68) Von Berg does not say why he did not shoot himself. Perhaps he saw fleeing to France as a better way to avoid the barbarism of the Nazis instead of either standing up to them or killing himself. But Von Berg is forced to confront the evil of the Nazis and the complicity in his own heart. That complicity does not make him as bad as the Nazis, but he can no longer claim to be innocent.

Janey Balakain explains that Miller is depicting a tragic consequence of Original Sin. “It is about Von Berg’s inability to walk away from the central conflict, and therefore, about his tragic existence.” (Cambridge 129) What determines the action is not the question of innocent or guilt so much as how one chooses to act in consequence of the Fall of Man. Like Quentin in After the Fall, Leduc discusses the murderous heart within all men. To confront this murderous heart, Von Berg gives up his pass, an action that horrifies Leduc when he fully understands it, how he will now live at the expense of Von Berg’s life. “I wasn’t asking you to do this!” Leduc pleas. “You don’t owe me this!” (Incident at Vichy 69) Von Berg tells him to go, and Leduc escapes.

“There are actions that we call non-actions and we have what I won’t call a moral responsibility for but rather a literal connection with the evil of the time,” Miller says of Vichy. “We have an investment in evils that we manage to escape. [W]hat happens is
simply that by virtue of these circumstances, a man is faced with his own complicity with what he despises.” (Evan 74)

Again Miller uses the past to color the present: Leduc reveals that he knows of Von Berg’s cousin, Kessler. Von Berg decided to expiate his responsibility to his cousin, as it suggests complicity with what Von Berg hates. As with most moralists in Miller’s works, Leduc cannot see matters in shades of grey. Leduc calls Von Berg to judgment, which he might be doing because he knows he will be detained while Von Berg will be set free. Von Berg accepts the judgment, so he sacrifices himself for Leduc, giving Leduc the pass.

“With that freedom he must accept the guilt of surviving his benefactor,” Miller says. “Is he a ‘good’ man for accepting his life this way or a ‘bad’ one? That will depend on what he makes of his guilt, of his having survived.” (Echos 75) Leduc is at first horrified and awed by Von Berg’s sacrifice, and is painfully aware of his own guilt. It even ties into what he discussed with the German major earlier, when Leduc said he would not refuse if he were released and the others kept. Understanding Von Berg’s sacrifice, Leduc is able to walk out the door quickly, but not with a “light heart.”

Miller says that Vichy’s theme is about an individual’s relationship with violence and injustice, even when the violence and injustice seems like a foreign, horrific thing. “The first problem is not what to do about it,” Miller says, “but to discover our own relationship to evil, its reflection in ourselves.” (Echos 71) By struggling to find that relationship in himself, Von Berg is able to make the necessary sacrifice to save Leduc’s life.
“If Quentin is a usable analogy for Miller himself, it would seem that in the events of the eight years before the writing of *Vichy* made Miller find in himself qualities that he can accept only with difficulty. The accepting becomes possible, however, by extending the *mea culpa* to take in all men.” (Martin 101) But Miller says that human guilt, when examined as a part of human nature, “perhaps some practical good could come of it instead of endless polemic.” Miller states that if the hostility and aggression within people could be accepted as a fact instead of a “reprehensible sin,” perhaps humanity could guard against its own potential cruelty rather than saying it comes from “others” who took us “unawares.” (Echoes 74)

Gerald Weales explains that *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* are “thematically two of a kind.” Von Berg, like Quentin, is concerned about his name. Von Berg sees his name as his family, not just a title. It becomes more than that to him as the play progresses. “In the early Miller plays the quest for identity, for name, was a search for integrity,” Weales says. “In *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* that quest has become an attempt to find a workable definition.” (Corrigan 138) Quentin can take responsibility for his own life, and Von Berg’s responsibility allows him to give up the pass.

The split between these two plays and the earlier four can be found in what the heroes are looking for, or at least what they discover. Like Joe, Quentin and Von Berg discover their own guilt and their responsibility. Like Proctor and Eddie, both are able to keep their self image and pride. But while Quentin finds the acceptance of his own murderous heart to start a new life with Holga, Von Berg sees himself “not so much an opponent of Nazism but a vessel of guilt for its brutalities,” Miller explains. “As a man of intense sympathy for others he will survive but at a price too great for him to pay—the
authenticity of his own self-image and his pride.” (Echoes 72)

Conclusion.

Arthur Miller’s work began is as an indictment of capitalism at the expense of society or the family, and moved onward to a more general study of the collective guilt of humanity. Suicide played a part in that, as his earlier characters committed suicide out of self-justification. Joe Keller shipped the defective parts for the sake of his family, and commits suicide for the same reason. Most of Willy Loman’s actions are to be successful for his family, and his suicide will provide the money needed for his son to be successful (even though the money is not mentioned at Willy’s grave). Both men strove for the brass ring to become good providers, and wreck the families they intend to provide for.

In turn, James Proctor and Eddie Carbone are not obsessed with money, but with their names. Both are desperate to retain their good names, even though both feel they do not deserve them. Proctor eventually sees the goodness in himself to stand against the theocracy and Danforth, even though that means his death. Eddie’s blindness to his feelings for Catherine leads to his informing, the community’s taboo. His desperation to get his name back leads to a blood duel with Marco, and Eddie falling on his own knife in the play and committing suicide in Lumet’s movie.

Like Eddie, Miller characters cannot settle for half. Chris Keller has this drive, although he does not commit suicide. Miller’s people live by the absolutes they themselves set up. This drive is in Willy Loman, John Proctor, Eddie Carbone, and in Quentin. Quentin struggles to see the innocence and betrayal in others and himself, leading to him accepting how everyone lives “after the fall.” Von Berg begins Incident at Vichy by setting for half by leaving Austria for a “safe zone” in France. When he realizes
that the Nazis are enacting his will in a twisted way, he decides to no longer settle for half by giving up his pass to Leduc.

In certain plays, the protagonist must learn his fault and suffer as a result, and even die. A tragic suicide is usually "socially motivated" to reinforces the values of a group or community, restoring moral order. Arthur Miller did not put suicide in his plays as a way to wrap everything up, or to end the play dramatically. He told stories of men who tried to conform and were destroyed (Joe, Willy), and those of men who tried not to conform and were destroyed (Proctor, Eddie). But these plays have men that are able to keep their integrity, even Willy and Eddie, who have the wrong dreams and ideals but fervently commit themselves nonetheless.

"In any case, death, when it takes those we have loved, always hands us a pass," Miller says. "From this transaction with the earth the living takes this survivor’s reproach; consoling it and at turns denying its existence in us, we constantly regenerate (Hermann) Broch’s ‘unity of thought, the ethical postulate’—the debt, in short, which we owe for living, the debt to the wronged." (Echoes Down the Corridor 73)

Miller says that the sight of a man’s own crimes can be both the highest torment and the hardest to relate to. Subjective and objective truths clash in Miller’s characters, and they emerge in Proctor, Quentin and Von Berg. In Proctor, it gives him the courage to keep his name so it cannot be used for evil purposes, even if that means his death. Quentin realizes the darkness in his heart and it gives him the courage to fall in love again. Von Berg sees his connection to Leduc and gives him the pass.

Miller is a strong moralist, and he believes that a man must struggle to have meaning in his life. But Miller himself did not understand why someone would sacrifice
his life. “I do not know why any man actually sacrifices himself any more than I know why people commit suicide,” Miller says. “The explanation will always be on the other side of the grave, and even that is doubtful.” (Echoes Down the Corridor 72)

But Miller is speaking of why real people commit suicide, not the fictional characters he creates, even characters based on real people. These are characters who commit themselves totally, even if that commitment leads to their deaths. But as times changed and Miller learned more about the world and man’s place in it, his characters began to learn of the dark heart of humanity. He started to learn how man can betray himself and the world, not just his family or a small community.

In After the Fall, Miller changed suicide from something the main character does to something a supporting character does, and how that act affects the main character. The suicides of Lou and Maggie weigh heavily upon Quentin’s mind, even though both their deaths free Quentin from an immediate burden. He sees this as betraying those he cares about, and he does not forgive himself. But he learns and is able to move forward, gaining a better appreciation for his life.

Finally, in Incident at Vichy, the last two remaining detainees exchange places. Leduc’s talk of responsibility gets through to Von Berg, and the aristocrat is able to sacrifice himself. He finds the courage to resist a dominating evil, even though that resistance means his own death. A man moved beyond his guilt and self-pity to take action. The sacrifice of Von Berg ends the play on an optimistic note, albeit one balanced by a new group of prisoners being led into the room.

Through these six plays, Arthur Miller showed his audiences what his characters would sacrifice their lives for, even to the point of suicide. Each character eventually
reaches a situation where they cannot walk away. These characters fascinate and stay with the audience because they show what it means to give all they can for a cause or belief, forcing the audience to question how far they would go for something they believe in, and how they could avoid the ultimate sacrifice of their own lives. Atonement for past failures and an affirmation of ideals and love can be done without self-destruction.


