

## “Miller and Women” with reference to his novel *After the Fall*

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**Abstract:** *The play is a violent speech against women “a verbal attack”. The play After the Fall includes a thinly disguised portrayal of Miller’s unhappy marriages. Miller has used the stage as a medium to justify and rationalize the cathartic explanation of his life including his two failed marriages. The play is also an implication that there is no such thing as private life. Miller, however, manages to bring them together into the play. Marriage is said to be a legal union between men and women by mutual consent. Here, the irony of marriage is that it fails to assure happiness.*

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Unlike other plays of Miller which are male oriented, where the women remain conventional and shadowy figures, diffused and unfocused, in *After the Fall*, we find an exception, and see a noticeable change of attitude towards sex in general and women in particular. In the play, Quentin returns to the past to discover the true nature of his guilt to reveal his life and urge the audience to be aware of the limits of love, friendship, truth and justice. Ultimately, he realizes that the family is pivotal for a smooth and easygoing life. Harold Clurman finds “*After the Fall* a signal step in the evolution of Arthur Miller as man and artist” (*Themes and Variations* 96).

*After the Fall* focuses Quentin and his problem with women. The play is a violent speech against women “a verbal attack.” The play *After the Fall* includes a thinly disguised portrayal of Miller’s unhappy marriages. The play was published after a gap of seven years. Until then, Miller had written nothing for the stage. When the play was produced in 1964, many spectators considered the play offensive and embarrassing. Quentin is Miller’s prototype and the play is highly autobiographical. Symbolically, Miller is the protagonist of this play. His life including his two failed marriages, his childhood, is reflected in the character of Quentin.

The play presents the events of American history, the effects of war, the Depression, the McCarthy era, the holocaust on the minds of the people. Miller dramatized all this with power for sixty years. Morris Freedman says, “We may read *After the Fall* along with *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *The Price* as a kind of Galsworthian family tetralogy, an integrated saga in which there is a thematic progression. The play may be read, indeed, as a work about the same family considered under changing circumstances and from different perspectives. The development of the first play to fourth play provides a record of the changing values of American middle class family life during the period in which they are written”(Freedman 43).

Miller has used the stage as a medium to justify and rationalize the cathartic explanation of his life including his two failed marriages. The play is therefore, a sort of therapy session, recapitulating painful dull events where he explains his shattered relationship from his childhood, his nagging wife Lousie, his neighbors and the struggle of the co-workers torn between integrity and career. Miller, however, manages to bring them together into the play. With themes such as introspection, betrayal, responsibility and innocence, the play is outstandingly penetrating and brilliantly written.

The bright spot in the play is Maggie who is a clear reflection of Marilyn Monroe. The play is also an implication that there is no such thing as private life. “The play was about how we-nations and individuals-destroy ourselves by denying that this is precisely what we are doing. Indeed, if Maggie was any reflection of Marilyn, who had many other dimensions, the character’s agony was a tribute to her. For in life, as far as the public was concerned, Marilyn was practically barred from any conceivable connection with suffering; she was the golden girl, the forever young goddess of sexuality, beyond pain and anxiety, a mythically anesthetized creature outside the reach of ordinary mortality, and hence of real sympathy” (*Timebends* 527).

Marriage is said to be a legal union between men and women by mutual consent. Here, the irony of marriage is that it fails to assure happiness. In *After the Fall*, the protagonist Quentin is in search of a woman in his life. Miller’s relationship with Augustha Miller, Mary Grace Slattery, Marilyn Monroe, Inge Morath, and Agnes Barley reveals his fractured inner self. Miller’s first two marriages ended in divorce. Maybe Miller was doing the right things for quite wrong reasons by going into a relationship for the third time. In a way, Miller shatters the institution of marriage, which Bernard Shaw tries to save in *Candida*. The play is one of the most experimental works of Miller, and is about a person who discovers himself and reveals his identity. Miller is also aware of his personal failure as a son, husband and friend. All the characters in *After the Fall* are a flashback of Miller’s memory. The entire play deals with self-analysis, a clash between his personal life and the society around him. According to Nelson, *After the Fall* juxtaposes a man’s agonizing confrontation of heart of darkness in himself and in humanity with the tenuous and illogical hope that springs, not from the evasion of

knowledge, but from its acceptance. Like the protagonist of Dante’s *Inferno*, Quentin has found himself in the ‘middle of the journey of his life, in a dark wood where the straight way was lost’, and in the subsequent search for the way out, has come to understand his complicity in the darkness, a complicity centered in the phenomenon of seperatedness. His seperatedness, however, cannot wholly eradicate the fact that he lives in a world of other men, in which choice and responsibility are implied (Nelson 269).

Quentin is shown to us suffering with his first wife Louise who turns her back in the bed. “You have turned your back on me in bed,” (167) which is a clear indication of Louise not paying proper attention to her husband. Quentin finds Louise cold in bed. On the other hand, Louise has been leading an unhappy married life for the past years. She even confronts Quentin with accusation “...It’s been about the last three years. You don’t want me” (182). This shows the love between them has in fact dried away. Louise wants to be a separate person on her own, an outgrowth of Ibsen’s *Nora*. Louise is purely subjective in her unhappy married life. Quentin is also aware of the dying away of love between them. Louise is not an adoring mother type and thus wants to be a “separate person” (168). She faces the problem of identity.

Louise is clearly a counterpart of Miller’s mother who leaves her adoring husband bereft of cash. Her marriage was of course an arranged one. To her awe, she found that her husband could neither read nor write. “My mother’s dislikes, of course, were merely expression of her sense of entrapment in her own marriage and during the second half of her life-after the Depression had laid low every last hope of ever really changing her condition” (*Timebends* 30). Here in *After the Fall*, mother has pinned all the hopes on Quentin. Miller’s mother is a wise woman and therefore shows her supremacy both towards his son and towards husband.

Quentin’s writing was stressed by his mother, as a reproach to his illiterate father. “Why don’t you practice penmanship instead? You write like a monkey darling”(143). “The mother’s life, a series of frustrations, seeks artistic expression through her son” (Lewis 41). The treachery of his mother sprang from his self-interest. Thus, by seeing the flawed mother image, Quentin witnesses the death of love from an early age. The mother humiliates the father, just because of his intellectual inferiority, “...two weeks after we were married; sit down to dinner and Papa hands me a menu, and asks me to read it to him...Couldn’t read! I got so frightened I nearly ran away! (144) and her curse “you are an idiot” (147) when the business collapses show the mother’s shock and frustration.

“Father is gradually losing his stance, his grandeur...He sits, closing his eyes, his neck bent” (146). Quentin is the key witness to the failure of love and trust between the parents. Quentin’s mother left his father trying to become a separate person in the midst of Depression. The mother even betrayed Quentin, when he was a small boy,

Shall we lay it all to mother (...) aren’t there mothers who keep dissatisfaction hidden to the grave and do not split the faith of sons until they go in guilt for what they didn’t do? (157)

The mother here is a faint reminder of Miller’s own mother who too was an agonized shadow of the Depression. The mother instead of holding the family together leaves it abandoned and deserted, thus destroying the mother image.

It is(...)like my mother; so many of my thoughts of her degenerate into some crime; the truth is she was a light to me whenever it was dark. I loved that nut, and only love does make her real and mine. Or can one ever remember love? It’s like trying to summon up the smell of roses in a cellar. You might see a rose, but never the perfume. And that’s the truth of roses, isn’t it-the perfume?”(212).

Quentin’s bewilderment and incapability of love have roots in his childhood. Right from his childhood, we see hints of the origin of the problem the character faces, such as a “manipulative mother.” Quentin loved her so much that he was criticized for it. After Quentin’s mother died he said. Referring to his own mother, Miller frankly writes in *Timebends*, “My own mother was mortally flawed by her very normal expectations for a successful son far too grossly material to leave intact the gossamer of her ancient authority, her love was too real, too mixed with the needs of her own impure transactional self”(327)

Maggie in the play is so self-indulgent, so emotionally demanding that at no time, we suspect that Miller is making her more grotesque than she was. The character of Maggie is a clear reflection of Marilyn. More space is given to Maggie than any other character. Maggie, Quentin’s second wife, is Miller’s interpretation of Marilyn. She is a highly destructive and free spirited girl. After having a divorce from Marilyn, Arthur Miller married Inge Morath (a magnum photographer) and in the aftermath of Monroe’s still controversial death, Miller wrote this play, a part catharsis and part clarification of the recent events. She was mere unformed clay in her own view until he, someone shaped and directed her every action. Her exigency left him physically ragged and limp (Nicholas *New York Times*. August 12, 2004).

Miller’s Maggie is initially secretary at the law firm where Quentin works. “Maggie can inspire love in others as easily as she can deny to herself and her every word aches not only with longing, but the belief that she will get what she wants. When she shatters into a million pieces, driven to brink of hopelessness by alcohol, pills and corrosive self image, she takes your heart with her” (Murray *Theatre Review* 2004). “Maggie becomes an instrument of personal destruction once the anarchic criticism that she embodies has been thwarted by the

patriarchy as it is initially exploited, contained and finally suffocated”(Alter 140). Maggie enters the life of Quentin when love between Lousie and Quentin was fading away. Maggie was not happy with her image as a sex symbol. Maggie was even painfully aware that she was a joke to most of the people. She takes Quentin seriously.

Quentin’s inability to offer love to Maggie and his attitude of not being hypocritical in his relationship is clearly revealed. Maggie shows her signs of jealousy on the wedding day when Elsie kisses Quentin in a sexy fashion. “... And you...you won’t ever look at any woman, right? (...) though-why did you kiss that Elsie? But...why’d you let rub her body against you?”(215). The dream of heaven explodes into hell. In the final scene Maggie and Quentin ask too much of each other. “Quentin: But how would you know Maggie? Do you know anymore who I am? Aside from my name? I’m all the evil in the world aren’t I? All the betrayal, the broken hopes, the murderous revenge?”(230

For Marilyn admiration was linked with love. As Carson remarks, “Marilyn was poised to marry a man who very much appealed to her desire for self-improvement. However, his (Miller’s) tendency to lecture her and be wisdom figure fed her the sense of inferiority. Maggie was a character out of reach of ordinary man and therefore deserves sympathy” (119). Some critics even point out that it is Maggie for whom Quentin’s life is thrown into turmoil. Miller has displayed his innermost self in the play: his relationship with Marilyn soon after her death. “Such scenes are evidently catharsis for the author but embarrassment for the viewer” (Lewis 39). Maggie is completely abandoned by her parents as well as Quentin, a man whom she completely wanted to be identified with. *After the Fall* had to fail. “With a few stubborn exceptions the reviews were about a scandal not a play, with barely a mention of any theme, dramatic intention or style, as though it was simply an attack on a dead woman” (*Timebends* 534).

Miller’s failure in his marriage is a journey of his self-realization. His betrayal of his first two wives and thereby ruining his own family life, hangs like a proverbial Albatross round his neck. Maybe Miller’s sense of insecurity led him to have marriage after marriage in the hope of getting some solace. The same is true of Quentin.

For Quentin, Holga is a mature psychic partner. Yet he realizes that knowingly or unknowingly he has isolated himself from all who are close to him, by trying to establish a positive relationship with them. The reconstruction of Quentin’s attempt to strangle Maggie/his mother/Lousie ends abruptly when Holga appears “on the highest level” of the stage. Her return brings a swift resolution that it may strain credulity to accept it as a legitimate end” (Otten 129). Unlike his first two wives, Holga was a different kind of woman—a very practical woman—who was born in the hellish torment of war experience. “I am not a woman who must be reassured every minute, those women are stupid to me,” (139) says Holga to Quentin. “You’re not a woman to go to bed just for the ride,” says Quentin (139). Holga is a very independent woman, “I am not helpless alone” (139). She looks at life very optimistically. Her world is extra-personal where relationship operates within vast network connecting people, society and nation. Holga tells Quentin about a dream which she has been seeing for a longtime. She narrates her personal life, when in a bombing Holga lost her memory and was looking for a safe place. Out of despair, she tried to jump from a railing of a bridge but was saved by a lame soldier who slapped her face and pulled her back and led her safely home.

When Quentin realizes that he stands alone, a mature partner like Holga could only say such words. “I think, one must finally take one’s life in one’s arms” (148). For Quentin, Holga is a mature psychic partner and the relationship between them represents “wholeness.” Holga is, in fact, the solution of every problem of Quentin. As he contemplates, “should I who have failed twice marry a third time?” However, initially Quentin believes that “These Goddamned women have injured me” (131). But at the end, he accepts his own guilt and his incapability of love. “It is with Holga, the third woman, that he moves towards love through recognition of his own capacity for evil selfishness, a recognition that comes with his discovering his own psychic identity” (Scalan 146). *After the Fall* “doesn’t refer to the bomb, but to the Garden of Eden and the fall of man after the woman seduced him to taste the fruit of knowledge” (Lewis 37). Miller was not only a victim of false system of values but he was a victim of himself as he was not true to himself and marriage had simply served as an alternative explanation of his disaster.

“The woman’s question will never be solved in any complete way so long as marriage is thought to be incompatible with freedom and an independent career. Ibsen did also demand that laws might be changed to grant woman greater freedom and equality”. (Gelb *The New York Times*. 29.11.1964). The end of the act is heavily ironic as Quentin reluctantly faces someday or the other he will have to face the accusation of Maggie. The memory of his dead wife haunts him and has a feeling of losing the Garden of Eden. The fall rather symbolizes the fall of a writer to understand womanhood. *After the Fall* remains a troublesome depiction of womanhood by one of the most renowned modern American dramatists in literature”. (Nicholas *Theater Review*). His inability to understand woman made Maggie/Marilyn a very sympathetic character. Miller perhaps could have saved her life. After the publication of *Timebends*, it is undeniably clear that Maggie is Marilyn regardless of Miller’s defensive responses. At the end of the writing of *After the Fall*, Marilyn died of an

overdose of sleeping pills. “In the play, her love is all consuming, her animal use of sex an outgrowth of an insatiable need to be wanted and the self-destructive suicidal drive a physical embracement of death as a welcome release” (Lewis 39). The reviewer from *Time* magazine best sums up the play’s message, “When things get tough, find a new woman and start again (...) In a world in which everyone is guilty, it is senseless to speak of innocence. Love does not exclude selfishness, betrayal or even hate” (Carson 121).

The play thus can be called a historical recounting of Miller’s own life. Each and every detail of his life is portrayed in this play. Miller’s relationship with women is clearly shown on stage. The autobiographical reflection of his life in the play is revealed. Miller, in a way has made his life public. Quentin is Miller himself, Lousie is Mary Grace Slattery, Maggie is Marilyn Monroe and Holga is Inge Morath. The Mother here represents Miller’s mother and Mickey is Elia Kazan who directed the plays for Lincoln Theatre and was the friend of Miller whose name was in the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Miller has simply displayed his intimate self in the play. The play does not really send an affirmative note. Miller/Quentin virtually turned his back on women desperately needing help. The play shows a series of betrayals especially in marital relationship. Quentin’s mother betrays his father out of sheer frustration. Quentin even betrays two of his former wives. Lousie betrays Quentin as she finds Quentin much influenced by his mother. Maggie’s life seems to be a series of betrayals right from her childhood. Elsie who betrays her husband Felice, and who divorced her husband with the help of Quentin, is still another failure in love. Family does not seem to be fundamental. Frustration is hidden in all the characters and is perhaps the root cause of failure in marriage. Lack of commitment towards each other seems to prevail in every character. This play is a tragedy of Quentin and Miller himself and the tragedy of American society.

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