

# Miller, Arthur (1915-)

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*Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Edition 1 1998

**Born:** October 17, 1915 in New York, New York, United States

**Died:** February 10, 2005 in Roxbury, Connecticut, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Playwright

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Arthur Miller (born 1915), American playwright, novelist, and film writer, is considered one of the major dramatists of 20th-century American theater.

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in New York City. His father ran a small coat-manufacturing business; during the Depression it failed, and in 1932, after graduating from high school, Miller went to work in an auto-parts warehouse. Two years later he enrolled in the University of Michigan. Before graduating in 1938, he won two Avery Hopwood awards for playwriting.

Miller returned to New York City to a variety of jobs, writing for the Federal Theater Project, the Columbia Workshop, and the Cavalcade of America. Because of an old football injury, he was rejected for military service, but he toured Army camps to collect material for a movie, *The Story of GI Joe*, based on a book by Ernie Pyle. His journal of this tour was titled *Situation Normal* (1944). That same year the Broadway production of his *The Man Who Had All the Luck* opened and closed almost simultaneously, though it won a Theater Guild Award. In 1945 his novel, *Focus*, a diatribe against anti-Semitism, appeared.

With the opening of *All My Sons* on Broadway (1947), Miller's theatrical career burgeoned. The Ibsenesque tragedy won three prizes and fascinated audiences across the country. Then *Death of a Salesman* (1949) brought Miller a Pulitzer Prize, international fame, and an estimated income of \$2 million. The words of its hero, Willy Loman, have been heard in at least 17 languages as well as on movie screens everywhere. By the time of his third Broadway play, *The Crucible* (1953), audiences were ready to accept Miller's conviction that "a poetic drama rooted in American speech and manners" was the only means of writing a tragedy out of the common man's life.

In these three plays Miller's subject was moral disintegration. His shifting from contemporary life in *Salesman* to the Salem witch hunt of 1692 in *The Crucible* hardly disguised the fact that he had in mind Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations of Communist subversion in the United States and the subsequent persecutions and hysteria. When Miller was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in June 1956, he argued, "My conscience will not permit me to use the name of another person and bring trouble to him." He was convicted of contempt of Congress; the conviction was reversed in 1958.

Two one-act plays, *A View from the Bridge* and *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955), were social dramas focused on the inner life of working men; neither had the power of *Salesman*. Nor did his film script, *The Misfits* (1961). His next play, *After the Fall* (1964), was a bald excursion into self-analysis. His second wife, Marilyn Monroe, was the model for the heroine. *Incident at Vichy* (1965), a long one-act play based on a true story out of Nazi-occupied France, examined the nature of racial guilt and the depths of human hatreds; it is discursive exercise rather than highly charged theater.

In *The Price* (1968) Miller returned to domestic drama in a tight, intense confrontation between two brothers, almost strangers to each other, brought together by their father's death. It is Miller at the height of his powers, consolidating his position as a major American dramatist.

However, *The Price* proved to be Miller's last major Broadway success. His next work, *The Creation of the World, and Other Business*, was a series of comic sketches first produced on Broadway in 1972. It closed after only twenty performances. All of Miller's subsequent works premiered outside of New York. Miller staged the musical *Up from Paradise* (1974; an adaptation of his *Creation of the World*), at his alma mater, the University of Michigan. Another play, *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, was presented in 1977 at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. In the 1980s, Miller produced a number of short pieces. *The American Clock* was based on author Studs Terkel's oral history of the Great Depression, *Hard Times*, and was structured as a series of vignettes that chronicle the hardship and suffering that occurred during the 1930s. *Elegy for a Lady* and *Some Kind of Story* were two one-act plays that were staged together in 1982. Miller's *Danger, Memory!* was composed of the short pieces *I Can't Remember Anything* and *Clara*. All these later plays have been regarded by critics as minor works. In the mid-1990s, Miller adapted *The Crucible* for the Academy Award-nominated film starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Joan Allen. Miller's work returned to the stage in 2004 with the premiere of *Finishing the Picture* at the Goodman Theater in Chicago.

Miller remains secure in his reputation as a major figure in American drama. His awards include the Theatre Guild National Prize, 1944; Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award, 1947 and 1953; Pulitzer Prize for drama, 1949; Emmy Award, 1967; George Foster Peabody Award, 1981; John F. Kennedy Award for Lifetime Achievement, 1984; Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, 1999; Tony for best play revival, 1999; and the Tony Lifetime Achievement Award, 1999. In 2000, Miller's play *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*, first published in 1992, was nominated for a Tony Award for best play.

Critics have hailed his blending of vernacular language, social and psychological realism, and moral insight. As the commentator June Schlueter has said, "When the twentieth century is history and American drama viewed in perspective, the plays of Arthur Miller will undoubtedly be preserved in the annals of dramatic literature."

## FURTHER READINGS

Miller's *Collected Plays* was published in 1957, and a collection of his short stories, *I Don't Need You Any More*, in 1967. His *Collected Plays, Volume II* was published in 1980. *The Portable Arthur Miller*, which includes several of his major plays, was published in 1971. S.K. Bhatia's study *Arthur Miller* was published in 1985. See also C.W.E. Bigsby's *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, published in 1984. Partly biographical is Benjamin Nelson, *Arthur Miller: Portrait of a Playwright* (1970), although the focus is on the plays. Useful critical studies are Leonard Moss, *Arthur Miller* (1967); Edward Murray, *Arthur Miller, Dramatist* (1967); Neil Carson, *Arthur Miller*, (1982); David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (1992); Alice Griffin, *Understanding Arthur Miller* (1996); Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (1997); Stefani Koorey, *Arthur Miller's Life and Literature: An Annotated and Comprehensive Guide* (2000). In addition to these sources, there are numerous Internet web sites devoted in whole or in part to Miller's life and works.

Updates:

February 10, 2005: Miller died on February 10, 2005, at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut, of heart failure. He was 89. Source: CNN.com, www.cnn.com, February 11, 2005.

Awards:

Major awards include the Theatre Guild National Prize, 1944; Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award, 1947 and 1953; Pulitzer Prize for drama, 1949; Emmy Award, 1967; George Foster Peabody Award, 1981; John F. Kennedy Award for Lifetime Achievement, 1984; Olivier Award, Society of West End Theatre, 1995; Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, 1999; Tony for best play revival, 1999; Tony Lifetime Achievement Award, 1999; and Lifetime Achievement Award, New Dramatists, 2001.

Richard M. Ludwig

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### Source Citation

"Miller, Arthur (1915-)." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 5 Oct. 2012.

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