

A STUDY OF THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS  
IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAYS

By

ROGER NORMAN FRELING

Bachelor of Science

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, Oklahoma

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Thesis Approved:

*Clenton Keeler*

Thesis Adviser

*Daniel R. Kroll*

*Robert Maudsley*

Dean of the Graduate School

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## PREFACE

I became interested in the plays of Arthur Miller after reading Death of a Salesman. This, I felt, was one of the most significant plays that had been written for the contemporary theatre. After reading his other plays, I discovered a recurring theme in his work: the dignity of man. Possibly because of the recency of his plays, little critical work has been done in this field. No one, to my knowledge, with the exception of Arthur Miller himself in his appraisal and criticism of his plays, has done anything with the idea of human dignity in these plays. For this reason I felt that work could profitably be done on this subject.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Clinton C. Keeler for his helpful suggestions and much-needed encouragement while I was writing this paper. I also want to thank Dr. Daniel R. Kroll and Dr. William R. Van Riper for their aid in the preparation of this thesis. And to my wife, Mary Lynne, I am greatly indebted for her patient but skillful retyping of correction after correction, revision after revision, of this paper.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller is considered to be one of the foremost contemporary playwrights in the United States. His plays have met with overwhelming success in theaters not only in the United States but throughout the world. Death of a Salesman, in particular, has received much acclaim. John Mason Brown has stated that Death of a Salesman is "the most poignant statement of man as he must face himself to have come out of the theatre."<sup>1</sup> Harold Clurman has commented that this play "is one of the outstanding plays in the repertory of the American theatre."<sup>2</sup> Its popularity in this country cannot be denied. In Spain it ran longer than any other modern play. When it was produced in a northern town in Norway, the Arctic fishermen returned night after night to view the spectacle of Willy's destruction as if there were something mystical about the whole thing.<sup>3</sup> Although Miller has written only five plays that have been successfully produced, he has had a profound influence upon the contemporary theatre.

Miller got off to a slow start in his literary career, writing play after play that was not accepted and having The Man Who Had All

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<sup>1</sup>John Mason Brown, "Even as You and I," Still Seeing Things (New York, 1950), p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>Harold Clurman, Lies Like Truth (New York, 1958), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur Miller, Collected Plays (London, 1958), p. 27-28.

the Luck fail dismally after an abortive four-day run on Broadway. He finally achieved national recognition with the publication of Focus, a novel about anti-Semitism. Two years later, in 1947, All My Sons was successfully produced on Broadway. This play met with immediate popularity and subsequently won the Critics Award for the best play of the year. In two more years, Death of a Salesman appeared and met with similar success on Broadway, receiving an even greater reception than All My Sons. For this play he received the Pulitzer Prize. Death of a Salesman is considered by most critics to be Miller's most significant, meaningful, and effective work. The pitiful and, in places, terrifying spectacle of Willy's despair and ultimate suicide grips the heart of most viewers, for the play exposes the folly of Willy's values and ideals, the same values and ideals that many millions of Americans apparently hold to varying degrees. Willy's uniqueness produces pity in the viewer; his universality, terror. Before working on another play of his own, in 1950 Miller published an adaptation of Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, which was produced on Broadway. He was struck by its powerful theme and forceful action, yet felt that it needed modernizing for a contemporary audience. In 1953, partially in response to the "witch-hunts" instigated by Senator McCarthy, Miller wrote The Crucible, a drama whose action concerns the witch-hunts of old Salem in 1692. The impact of the play was magnified by its application to a particular situation in the United States in the early fifties. Miller writes that "the night of its opening was a time when the gale from the Right was blowing at its fullest fury."<sup>4</sup> His next effort was a combination of two short plays, produced together in 1955. A Memory of Two Mondays,

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

the first and shorter of the plays, does little more than create a general impression. Reminiscent of Miller's own adolescence, the action takes place in a shipping room of a warehouse in which many characters come and go sporadically. The second play, A View from the Bridge, is much more significant. Although neither play was very popular on Broadway, A View from the Bridge was revised and produced in London, where it was extremely well received. These two plays are Miller's last literary productions. Since 1955 his creative powers have been dormant, but much is expected of him in the future. Clurman has said that in the American theatre "today Miller has become the white hope."<sup>5</sup>

All of Miller's plays seem to have many basic similarities. Even a superficial inspection of the plays makes this apparent. They are all serious in nature, they deal with common man in his actual environment, and they portray men in conflict, not usually with one another, but with some superior, nearly inexorable force. A deeper investigation of the situations in these plays sheds further light on their common characteristics. The settings and particular conflicts in them vary considerably, but characterization is an important aspect of the plays in which we find similarities.

Characterization is perhaps the most important element in Miller's plays, in contrast to Aristotle's concept that plot should be of primary importance. In all of the plays, with the exception of A Memory of Two Mondays, the focus is placed on character. The men themselves--Willy, Biff, Chris, Proctor, and Eddie--are the essence of the drama. The action only serves to reveal these men's characters to the audience. One critic stated that "A View from the Bridge must rise or fall on its

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<sup>5</sup>Clurman, p. 42.

dramatic effectiveness as a character study of Eddie Carbone."<sup>6</sup> This might also be said of the other plays, for in them characterization is the most significant element. The power and strength of Miller's plays lie in his ability to create a character whom we can understand and with whom we can identify ourselves. It is the characters in the play with which the audience is principally concerned. Miller himself has said:

The "actor" is a person, and he no sooner appears than certain elementary questions are broached. Who is he? What is he doing here? How does he live or make his living? Who is he related to? Is he rich or poor? What does he think of himself? What do other people think of him, and why? What are his hopes and fears; and what does he say they are? What does he claim to want, and what does he really want?<sup>7</sup>

The problem of this study is to determine whether the various characters in Miller's plays are similar, and, if so, in what respect and to what extent. Obviously the settings and plots are different in each play, but what common traits can be found in the characters? In All My Sons and Death of a Salesman we find middle-class merchants, the paragon of the average American; in The Crucible the scene shifts to Salem in the year 1692, but we still can see the protagonist, John Proctor, struggling for basically the same thing that Willy and Biff Loman and Joe and Chris Keller are searching for. Again in A View from the Bridge, which takes place in a poor section of New York City, we discover Eddie fighting for essentially the same thing.

And so we can discern a common characteristic in these men. It is their search for dignity. This perhaps needs explanation. These men are striving for recognition, for respect. In some cases this respect

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Hewes, "Death of a Longshoreman," Saturday Review, October 15, 1955, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup>Collected Plays, p. 4.

is bestowed by society, such as Willy's; in others the respect is self-respect or the respect of loved ones, such as Joe Keller and Proctor. In reality it is the search for self, for identity, the need of a man to discover who he really is. Oedipus is searching for this dignity as he pursues the truth about himself. Too, dignity may be achieved through the assertion of individuality. This is exemplified in Elizabethan drama by Cordelia in King Lear, who refuses to comply with her father's foolish wishes, and in Greek drama by Prometheus in Aeschylus' tragedy. These characters feel that they must have this dignity. As Miller says, it is "a need to leave a thumbprint somewhere on the world. A need for immortality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day."<sup>8</sup> Applicable here, too, is Tennessee Williams' statement that "the great and only possible dignity of man lies in his power deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live."<sup>9</sup>

This desire for dignity is a basic underlying quality that we find in all of the characters under consideration in this paper. Willy Loman, Biff, Joe Keller, Chris, John Proctor, Eddie, even Dr. Stockman in An Enemy of the People--they all fervently want what they consider to be dignity. In A View from the Bridge Eddie screams that Marco has deprived him of his dignity, his respect: "Wipin' the neighborhood with my name like a dirty rag! I want my name, Marco. Now gimme my name and we go together to the wedding."<sup>10</sup> Basically, this is what all of Miller's

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>Tennessee Williams, The Rose Tattoo, (New York, 1950), p. ix of preface.

<sup>10</sup>Collected Plays, p. 438.

characters desire. It is the need for individuality, for discovering one's identity, that propels these characters forward in their relentless search for meaning.

The search itself is another common aspect of these plays. These characters not only have aspirations that are similar, they all actively pursue them. None of these men are of the timid sort who cannot overcome inertia. They all attempt to assert their individuality in one way or another. They rebel against what seems to be degrading them. No effort will be made to establish the idea that these characters are really tragic figures, but I believe that what Miller himself says in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" is of significance in reinforcing the idea that these characters all act to fulfill their conception of dignity. He speaks of a character's flaw as being "his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are 'flawless.'"<sup>11</sup> This idea is relevant to all of the characters under consideration. They all refuse to remain passive in the face of what seems to degrade them; they feel compelled to act, to struggle against whatever seems to prevent their attaining the desired goal. Willy's suicide, Proctor's refusal to have his confession made public, Chris's relentless pursuit of the truth about his father, Eddie's challenge to Marco--all are examples of their refusal to be submissive, their compulsion to act in accordance with this deep-rooted desire to find dignity. This is the important idea here: all of the characters overcome passivity and move in the direction in which they think dignity lies.

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<sup>11</sup>Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," Theatre Arts, March 1951, p. 48.

Finally, we must consider the resolution of this problem. All of these characters basically want dignity and they all act in a way that to them seems most likely to secure this dignity. The question that arises is a natural one: do they attain it? The question is a difficult one to answer. To varying degrees all of these characters succeed. But in many cases the success is of a shallow and meaningless sort. Four of the characters die to secure this dignity. The other two, Biff and Chris, suffer considerably in the process. The important thing, however, is that they all fight against adverse circumstances, and in the fighting itself lies some dignity.

The procedure that will be followed in presenting this problem is a natural one. First I hope to show that all of Miller's characters basically want dignity. Next I plan to show how these characters actively seek this dignity. Finally the resolution will be considered, that is, are the characters successful in finding a sense of worth? I hope to go beyond this particular question to deal with the significance of these findings. What do they suggest about Miller's own philosophy and his attitude toward man? Now that the problem has been defined, let us examine it more deeply.

## CHAPTER II

### THE DESIRE FOR DIGNITY

One of the most important aspects revealed by an analysis of Miller's characters is the similarity of their inner needs. On a superficial level we can find no meaningful relationships between these needs, but basically they are nearly identical. If we probe deeply enough, it becomes apparent that these men are essentially striving for the same thing--dignity.

When we see Chris relentlessly pursuing the truth about his father after his suspicions have been aroused, when we view the deaths of Willy and Eddie, or when we behold Proctor refusing to allow his confession to be made public, it is not at all obvious that these actions could be caused by men whose basic needs are similar. But in actuality they are. These men are all desperately seeking one thing above all--dignity.<sup>1</sup>

This basic need can be seen in the two principal characters in All My Sons. Both father and son seek a sense of worth, dignity. Yet their conceptions of it are obviously quite different. In fact, it is this conflict in their conceptions of dignity that causes, first, the strife between them and, ultimately, the death of Joe Keller. Joe was primarily concerned with the respect he had from his family. It was this emphasis upon family ties and the lack of concern for man in general that make his idea of respect and dignity differ so radically from his son's.

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<sup>1</sup>See pp. 4-5.

Joe lived for his family. Everything he did was to heighten himself in their eyes. And because of this pre-occupation with the wants and needs of those three individuals that were closest to him, he neglected his duty to his fellowman. He was incapable of realizing that he had any obligations to anyone other than his family. He did not understand that he was not only the father of Larry and Chris but also of every son in the world. He could not make the connection; he failed to see, until too late, that they were "all his sons." Instead, he was only concerned with the welfare of Larry and Chris. Everything he did was for them, even when it meant risking the lives of others' sons. His life was built upon the foundation that dignity could be found by satisfying the wants of his family. This is easily seen in the play. Joe had slavishly worked to expand his business so that he would have something to give his sons. He was horrified at the thought of Chris's not accepting the gift:

Keller: You mean-- (Goes to him.) Tell me something, you mean you'd leave the business?

Chris: Yes. On this I would.

Keller, after a pause: Well ... you don't want to think like that.

Chris: Then help me stay.

Keller: All right, but--but don't think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you!<sup>2</sup>

Later we again see this overpowering drive to gain his son's love and respect by giving him something. He wanted to give him the business and build him a house:

Keller: I want a clean start for you, Chris. I want a new sign over the plant--Christopher Keller, Incorporated.

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<sup>2</sup>Collected Plays, p. 69.

Chris, a little uneasily: J. O. Keller is good enough.

Keller: We'll talk about it. I'm going to build you a house, stone, with a driveway from the road. I want you to spread out, Chris, I want you to use what I made for you.<sup>3</sup>

And after the truth of his actions have been revealed to Chris, Joe attempted to rationalize the atrocity by explaining that it was done for Chris. This, in his eyes, lessened his guilt. It is obvious that he considered his identity to be established only by his role as father of Larry and Chris. He specifically stated that "my only accomplishment is my son."<sup>4</sup> He rationalized about the failure of the airplane parts thus:

Keller: Chris ... Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya?

Chris: You even knew they wouldn't hold up in the air.

Keller: I didn't say that.

Chris: But you were going to warn them not to use them--

Keller: But that don't mean--

Chris: It means you knew they'd crash.

Keller: It don't mean that.

Chris: Then you thought they'd crash.

Keller: I was afraid maybe--

Chris: You were afraid maybe! God in heaven, what kind of a man are you? Kids were hanging in the air by those heads. You knew that!

Keller: For you, a business for you!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

Joe's values are apparent. He strove for the respect of his family. This to him was his identity, his sense of worth. Beyond the family his reputation was not of any great importance to him, but he had to feel that his family loved and admired him.

Another aspect of Joe's character needs to be mentioned here. This is his willingness to disregard truth for the sake of expediency. Joe realized that Larry was dead, yet admitting this was admitting that he was a murderer. He hadn't the moral strength to do this. John Mason Brown makes the following observation in his criticism of the play:

... the Kellers are living a lie, only in their case it is a lie within a lie. The myth of their son's possible return is merely the means his parents have chosen to protect themselves from facing the real cause of his death. This of course is the profiteer father himself; a little man who has lied his way out of jail by putting the blame on an underling.<sup>6</sup>

Joe only accepted that which was compatible with his sense of dignity. He himself said that "I ignore what I gotta ignore."<sup>7</sup> It was this facet of his character, in conjunction with his overwhelming concern for his family, that made him fail to realize his responsibility to his fellow-man.

Joe's desperate need to be respected by his family was, of course, the basic cause of the conflict between him and Chris. Chris, like his father, also wanted dignity and respect, but he could not be satisfied by only the respect of his family. On the contrary, he maintained that it was morally wrong for any individual to lose himself in his family to the extent that he felt no responsibility to the rest of mankind. Chris was concerned with all men and looked upon them as his brothers. This to him was important. The family ties were insignificant in comparison

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<sup>6</sup>John Mason Brown, "New Talents and Arthur Miller," Saturday Review (March 1, 1947), p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>Collected Plays, p. 68.

with the duty of man to all of society. This contrast to his father's ideas is explicitly brought out in the play:

Mother: Joe, Joe ... It don't excuse it that you did it for the family.

Keller: It's got to excuse it!

Mother: There's something bigger than the family to him [Chris].

Keller: Nothin' is bigger!

Mother: There is to him.<sup>8</sup>

The mother realized Chris's viewpoint and was trying to explain it to her obstinate husband. In comparison to the love of one man for another, everything dwindled in the eyes of Chris. Man had to accept the responsibility of concerning himself with others or he was a disappointment to Chris. Chris, in disgust at his father's actions, said, "You can be better! Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that's why he died."<sup>9</sup> The old excuse that all men have shortcomings was not enough for Chris. He was not interested in being "practical." Instead, he admired the men who acted according to what was right, regardless of the "practicality" of it. He said, "The cats in the alley are practical, the bums who ran away when we were fighting were practical. Only the dead ones weren't practical. But now I'm practical, and I spit on myself."<sup>10</sup> He respected those boys in his company who stayed to fight for what they believed in. With these men he felt a oneness, a deep sense of brotherhood. He spoke of the loss

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

to Ann:

Chris: It takes a little time to toss that off. Because they weren't just men. For instance, one time it'd been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That's only a little thing--but ... that's the kind of guys I had. They didn't die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they'd've been here today. And I got an idea--watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of responsibility. Man for man. You understand me? --To show that, to bring that onto the earth again like some kind of a monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him.<sup>11</sup>

Chris was convinced that the responsibility of one man for another transcended any family ties. He could not condone his father's actions on the excuse that it was done for the family.

Unlike his father, who could "ignore" the unpleasant, Chris advocated honesty in all matters. He deplored the fact that his father would not resolutely declare to Mother that Larry was dead:

Chris: But I know one thing, Dad. We've made a terrible mistake with Mother.

Keller: What?

Chris: Being dishonest with her. That kind of thing always pays off, and now it's paying off.<sup>12</sup>

It was this deep-seated honesty that motivated Chris to act as he did. It was an important aspect of his concept of dignity.

The conflict in All My Sons is caused by the clash of values of the father and son. Both wanted dignity and respect, but it meant a different thing to each of them. Joe assumed that he would find dignity by lavishly providing for his family, regardless of the moral trans-

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 66-67.

gressions that are necessary to realize this. Chris, on the other hand, thought that dignity could only be secured through honest action and a sincere concern for one's fellow beings. The conflict was inevitable. Chris despised his father's idea of dignity and respect, and his father could not understand his.

In Death of A Salesman a similar situation occurs. Here, too, we find a clash of values held by father and son. The values of Willy and Biff are so opposed that no harmony could exist between the two. Early in Biff's life Willy had had a great influence. But Biff, after the traumatic experience of discovering his father in the hotel room in Boston with a strange woman, tore himself loose from this influence and rebelled against all that his father stood for. Because of Biff's rejection of his values, Willy was in despair. All of Willy's world was falling apart, but because of his distorted values he could not understand the significance or cause of it. One reviewer writes:

There was a time when a smile and a shoeshine were Willy's passport into any buyer's office; the world was an oyster that belonged to the personable and the popular. Now, with his smile worn thin and his body grown gross, Willy's world disintegrates in a realization of lost markets, unpaid bills, and a host of nonexistent friends. But the nagging worry that unsettles the precarious balance of his fatigued brain is the knowledge that his stalwart sons are mediocrities and that Biff, the best-loved, is inexplicably antagonistic to his father.<sup>13</sup>

This "Dale Carnegie attitude" that Willy possessed is the essence of what might be termed his philosophy. Dignity was measured by him in terms of "popularity" and "influence." A typical example of this was his attitude toward his brother-in-law Charley's popularity: "He's liked, but he's not well liked."<sup>14</sup> Willy was sure that popularity and appearance were

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<sup>13</sup>"Magnificent Death," Newsweek (February 21, 1949), p. 78.

<sup>14</sup>Collected Plays, p. 114.

the keys to success. He continually taught this ideal to his sons.

For instance:

Willy: Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through.<sup>15</sup>

He even tried to explain his own obvious failure by attributing it to his "not dressing to advantage, maybe."<sup>16</sup> His attitude toward popularity and influence was brought out by Willy's profound admiration for an old and respected salesman:

Willy: ... I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he's drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y' understand, put on his green velvet slippers--I'll never forget--and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made a living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? Do you know? when he died--and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston--when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotta trains for months after that.<sup>17</sup>

The image of this salesman made a deep impression on Willy. Dave

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

Singleman was his model of success. While speaking with the apparition of Uncle Ben on the night he committed suicide, Willy recalled the death of this salesman. He wanted to die as this man had died. He envisioned his own funeral to be an equally important occasion:

Willy: Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates--that boy Biff will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realized--I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey--I am known, Ben, and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben! He's in for a shock, that boy!<sup>18</sup>

Willy's dream is also an indication of his values. He refused to accept defeat by admitting his life had been a dismal failure. Instead of facing the truth he concocted a world of fancy in which everything existed as he would have wished. Willy wanted to believe that his world of fancy was reality. His desire was so strong that he often lost himself in this other world. He deluded himself into thinking that he was as successful and "well-liked" as he envisioned. He had lived in this other world so long that it was the only one which provided him any comfort and solace. When he was forced to accept reality, he found himself in bewilderment and despair. One is reminded of the many derelicts in O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, whom we find in a similar situation. Willy wanted respect so much that he was forced to resort to "pipe dreams."

Willy's need to retreat into a world of fancy and untruth was the cause of the friction that occurred between him and Biff. Willy's spell over his son was shattered when Biff discovered him in the hotel room in Boston. From that day forward Biff realized that Willy was not what

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

he had thought him to be. He knew that his father was a "phony," a "fake." And so Biff set out on his own to find dignity. He didn't know where it lay, but he discovered that his concept of dignity was not compatible with dishonesty.

Biff was interested in one thing--finding reality, facing the truth and living in accordance with it. In disgust, he screamed at his father that "we never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!"<sup>19</sup> Truth became of primary importance to Biff, regardless of the consequences. This need for finding truth and accepting reality was the cause of his rejection of the values of society, that is, the society in which he had been reared. He knew that these values were not in accordance with truth. He spoke to Happy about this problem:

Biff: Well, I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still--that's how you build a future.<sup>20</sup>

In actuality, Biff was searching for his self. Biff felt certain that he could not discover who he really was while he was still covered by the veneer of superficial, meaningless social exigencies that are unavoidable when a man assumes a position in an urban society. Biff could only find dignity when he realized that he was living in accordance with his real nature, that is, when he knew that his actions did not conflict with his inner needs and desires. This is the reason for

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

his preference of a simple, rural existence. He rejected the business world and its set of values:

Biff: I don't care what they think! They've laughed at Dad for years, and you know why? Because we don't belong in this nuthouse of a city! We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or--or carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle!<sup>21</sup>

And his convictions were strengthened by his realization of the natural beauty that surrounds a man living in the country. He told Happy of the joys he experienced while working in Texas:

Biff: This farm I work on, it's spring there now, see? And they've got about fifteen new colts. There's nothing more inspiring or--beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. And it's cool there now, see? Texas is cool now, and it's spring.<sup>22</sup>

Truth and honesty were paramount to Biff. He understood that dignity was unattainable without adhering to these principles. Because his need for dignity was so great, he felt compelled to oppose forcefully that which was dishonest and superficial.

In The Crucible we find the main character, John Proctor, to be similar to Biff in some respects. Proctor was a simple man, and an honest one. He had a force of conviction about him that seemed to overwhelm all opposition. His inner strength was enormous. Miller wrote about this man and his friends:

From my first acquaintance with the story [of the Salem trials] I was struck hard by the breath-taking heroism of certain of the victims who displayed an almost frightening personal integrity. It seemed to me that the best part of this country was made of such stuff, and I had a strong desire to celebrate them and to raise them out of historic dust.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>23</sup>Henry Hewes, "Arthur Miller and How He Went to the Devil," Saturday Review (January 31, 1953), p. 25.

This rugged, yet pure, spirit was what made Proctor the forceful character which he was. He admired truth and honesty and opposed that which was false and insincere. He did not attend church frequently because he felt that the minister was not a sincere and devoted Christian. His detestation of hypocrisy created in him an aversion to Reverend Parris which he felt no need to overcome. He explained to Hale his reasons for not associating with the church:

Proctor: I surely did come when I could, and when I could not I prayed in this house.

Hale: Mr. Proctor, your house is not a church; your theology must tell you that.

Proctor: It does, sir, it does; and it tells me that a minister may pray to God without he have golden candlesticks upon the altar.

Hale: What golden candlesticks?

Proctor: Since we built the church there were pewter candlesticks upon the altar; Francis Nurse made them, y' know, and a sweeter hand never touched the metal. But Parris came, and for twenty week he preach nothin' but golden candlesticks until he had them. I labor the earth from dawn of day to blink of night, and I tell you true, when I look to heaven and see my money glaring at his elbows--it hurt my prayer, sir, it hurt my prayer. I think, sometimes, the man dreams cathedrals, not clapboard meetin' houses.

Hale, thinks, then: And yet, Mister, a Christian on Sabbath Day must be in church. Tell me--you have three children?

Proctor: Aye. Boys.

Hale: How comes it that only two are baptized?

Proctor, starts to speak, then stops, then as though unable to restrain this: I like it not that Mr. Parris should lay his hand on my baby. I see no light of God in that man. I'll not conceal it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Collected Plays, pp. 272-73.

Because the minister did not strike him as a man of sincere piety and love, Proctor refused to employ his services as a man of God.

Although he was a simple man, Proctor had a keen awareness of the significance of what transpired in Salem in, supposedly, the name of God. Long before the witch trials reached their terrible climax, he had said to Rebecca Nurse, "I mean it solemnly, Rebecca; I like not the smell of this 'authority.'"<sup>25</sup> He realized the atrocity of the "witch hunt"; he knew it was insane and unjust, that it was evil. And this evil was in direct conflict with Proctor's sense of morality. It seemed to challenge his sense of dignity, for he was certain that it was wrong not to oppose this injustice that was being perpetrated by the church. (In this respect he is similar to Dr. Stockmann in Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, who in a like manner felt compelled to oppose the construction of the poisonous baths.) He respected those condemned people who refused to surrender their dignity when faced with death. He said that "they go like saints."<sup>26</sup> Honest, courageous action was the basis of his admiration; it is the essence of his sense of dignity.

Eddie Carbone, the main character in A View from the Bridge, was also seeking dignity, but his concept of it was somewhat different from that held by the men considered above. He did not wish to be "well-liked," nor was he particularly interested in honesty or integrity. He was much more concerned with the respect accorded to him and in maintaining certain rights and privileges. Because of his repressed love for his niece, which has an overwhelming effect upon his behavior, it is a little difficult to determine exactly which of his actions were

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

motivated by his concept of dignity and which stemmed from his love for Catherine. Both were unknown to Eddie. He could no more articulately express his concept of dignity than he could be made to realize that he was really in love with his niece. "He would be outraged to face the truth of the matter, either by attempting an immoral act or even by considering the possibility that he was repressing an immoral desire."<sup>27</sup> Eddie's relation to his niece is much the same as that of Doc Delaney to Marie in Inge's Come Back, Little Sheba. In Eddie, however, the "immoral desire" is more pronounced. Although both his desire for dignity and his love for Catherine were unconscious, they were extremely influential in causing him to act as he did.

His concept of dignity was clearly indicated by many of his actions. He admired manly virtues: strength, courage, ruggedness, all that constitutes virility. He himself was tough and he felt that he could not be respected without this "manliness." An example of his respect for strength was his astonishment at Marco's ability to lift a chair with one hand. It was obvious that this feat of brute power had quite an effect on Eddie. The feeling was a mixture of awe and fear. But Rodolpho was the antithesis of Eddie's concept of masculinity. Eddie ridiculed and mocked all that Rodolpho did throughout the play. He sarcastically remarked, "It's wonderful. He sings, he cooks, he could make dresses ..."<sup>28</sup> He had nothing but contempt for the talent that Rodolpho possessed.

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<sup>27</sup>Hewes, "Death of a Longshoreman," p. 25.

<sup>28</sup>Collected Plays, p. 411.

Eddie, as the head of the house, felt that he had certain rights which should not be violated. When these rights were abused, he felt that he had been degraded. For instance, he refused to sleep on the floor when the immigrants came. His place was in bed with his wife; let the immigrants sleep on the floor.

Eddie: Beatrice, all I'm worried about is you got such a heart that I'll end up on the floor with you, and they'll be in our bed ... Because as soon as you see a tired relative, I end up on the floor.

Beatrice: When did you end up on the floor?

Eddie: When your father's house burned down I didn't end up on the floor?

Beatrice: Well, their house burned down!

Eddie: Yeah, but it didn't keep burnin' for two weeks! I just don't want you bein' pushed around, that's all.<sup>29</sup>

Eddie was afraid that someone would take advantage of him. He felt that sleeping on the floor would degrade him in his own eyes as well as the eyes of others.

His sense of dignity was based on very superficial values, but it was nevertheless quite real. Eddie wanted to be respected by those in his "society." Marco's accusations and final act of spitting in Eddie's face were the final blow to his self-respect. His self-esteem had been punctured like an inflated balloon. He had suffered humiliation in the eyes of his friends. Rodolpho could do nothing; his apology was unacceptable. Only Marco himself could right the wrong, by apologizing. This was the only satisfactory way to regain his dignity.

Eddie: I want my name! He Rodolpho didn't take my name; he's only a punk. Marco's got my name--and you can run tell

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

him, kid, that he's gonna give it back to me in front of this neighborhood, or we have it out.<sup>30</sup>

It was this need for dignity, for his name, that pushed Eddie on to his final destruction. Only his dignity mattered to him; other needs were petty in comparison to it.

All of the characters dealt with here want dignity. Their values differ widely, the paths by which they pursue their goal are divergent, but they are searching for the same thing: the fulfillment of the need for identity, for individuality. This desire for dignity is a powerful force that has an overwhelming influence on all of them. It directs their destiny. Exactly how they act to secure this dignity is the next problem that needs to be considered.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 437.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SEARCH FOR DIGNITY

It was determined in the preceding chapter that all the characters in this study desire a sense of worth. All of their thoughts, desires, and impulses center around this one basic need: the compulsion to find respect, to find individuality. To go further, it is evident that these men act in a way that to them seems most appropriate. As Arthur Miller says, each of these characters has an "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status."<sup>1</sup> None of these characters meekly submits to that which he feels degrades him. He fights back; he retaliates. The actions themselves vary widely in nature. Chris relentlessly pursues the truth about his father's actions; his father tries to win the affection of his family by struggling for their economic security; Willy strives desperately to be well liked, to sell himself; Biff rebels against his father's world of fancy and is determined to discover who he really is; Proctor acts in accordance with his conscience, knowing that his name will be dishonored if he confesses to the charges of the court; and Eddie fights both the man who steals his love and the man who steals his name. All of these actions are quite different, but this is not important. What is significant is that these men do act. They energetically struggle for dignity. This can be seen in all the plays.

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<sup>1</sup>Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," p. 48.

All My Sons is the story of a family that refused to face the truth. Kate Keller, the mother, insisted that her son, reported missing in the war three years before the action of the play commenced, was still alive and would return. One is reminded of Captain Bartlett in O'Neill's Where the Cross Is Made, who faithfully and foolishly awaited the return of his wrecked ship. Kate, like Captain Bartlett, would not listen to any arguments to the contrary. Joe, her husband, was willing to accept her beliefs, for he felt guilty about shipping out defective airplane parts from his shop, parts which ultimately failed and resulted in the deaths of many fliers. He had placed the blame on his partner and had been released from prison. Chris, their son, believed in the sincerity of his father's tale that it was not his fault, that he did not know that the defective parts were being shipped out. Chris, however, wanted to destroy his mother's belief in the return of his brother, for he himself wanted to marry his brother's bride-to-be. This girl, Ann, was the daughter of Joe Keller's partner, the man who was still serving the prison sentence for his crime. Ann visited the Kellers at the invitation of Chris, and it was during this time that the action of the play transpired. Ann's brother, George, came to the Keller's home after talking with his father and was convinced that his father was "framed" by Joe. George's convictions and sincerity started Chris thinking. He began questioning, and after a few slips, he dragged the confession from his father. Chris, deeply hurt and humiliated, was in despair. He wanted to leave his family and live alone. Ann, to show that she had a right to go with him and marry him, produced a letter from Chris's missing brother that was written on the day he was reported missing. In it he stated that he had just received news of the shameful action of his father and that as a result he felt like killing himself

on his next mission. The information disclosed by this letter, in addition to the scorn and rejection of Chris, was too much for Joe. He walked into the house and killed himself. Chris was plunged into deeper despair.

Joe Keller wanted the respect of his family. To gain this respect, he was willing to use any means. He felt that if he could provide for them abundantly and thus, he thought, make them happy, he would win their love and affection. And so he did all that was in his power to give them material comfort. He built up his business for his two sons. When Larry died, he was even more concerned that Chris should take over the business. It did not matter to Joe that his business was built on the lives of twenty-one fliers who died because of a failure of one of the parts that he produced. He felt no responsibility to people outside his family. He wanted the respect of his family and was only concerned with whether they loved and admired him. He did not question the belief of his wife that Larry was not dead; he was only interested in enjoying a harmonious relationship with her. If he began to question and doubt what Kate so strongly believed, he found that he would disturb this harmony, for his conscience was eased by the silence. When Chris said that his mother should be made to realize that the chance of Larry's return was almost impossible, his father was upset. He said, "What do you want to do, argue with her?"<sup>2</sup> And when Chris maintained that she must be told, he replied in fright, "You can't say that to her."<sup>3</sup> Harmony, love, and affection were all that concerned Joe. The price was not significant. The means by which he found harmony and love were

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<sup>2</sup>Collected Plays, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

of no consequence. But Joe came to realize that he could not find what he wanted by disregarding the rest of mankind. Because it was incompatible with truth, the harmony that seemed to exist in the Keller home was shattered when the facts about Joe's dishonesty were revealed. The truth produced an eruption in relations that was never reconciled.

George explained Joe's action:

George: Dad came to work that day. The night foreman came to him and showed him the cylinder heads ... they were coming out of the process with defects. There was something wrong with the process. So Dad went directly to the phone and called here and told Joe to come down right away. But the morning passed. No sign of Joe. So Dad called again. By this time he had over a hundred defectives. The Army was screaming for stuff and Dad didn't have anything to ship. So Joe told him ... on the phone he told him to weld, cover up the cracks in any way he could, and ship them out.... Dad was afraid. He wanted Joe there if he was going to do it. But Joe can't come down ... He's sick! Sick! He suddenly gets the flu! Suddenly! But he promised to take responsibility. Do you understand what I'm saying? On the telephone you can't have responsibility! In a court you can always deny a phone call and that's exactly what he did. They knew he was a liar the first time, but in the appeal they believed that rotten lie ...<sup>4</sup>

Joe acted dishonestly for one reason: he thought he could buy the love and respect of his family that he desired so much. And so he felt that he had to keep his shop in operation. He acted in a way that he thought would secure dignity for him. He was not concerned with the ultimate consequences of his actions.

Joe's final act in his attempt to find dignity and love was, of course, his death. Chris was so angered by the revelation of the truth that he had nothing but contempt for his father. Everything that Joe did was for his family, principally for his son. And so when he was

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-02.

rejected by Chris, he had nothing left for which to live. His death showed his love for his family, in all its distortion and meaninglessness. The man wanted dignity so badly that he killed himself when he realized that he had failed completely.

Chris was quite different from his father. Their values were diametrically opposed in nearly every respect. It was this difference that caused the conflict between the two. Chris was a man of action. Everything he did radiated vitality and energy; he was vibrant and full of the joy of life. Dignity to him was in realizing a responsibility to one's fellow man. And so Chris's every action was a pursuit of this truth.

This necessity to act to secure dignity can best be illustrated by Chris's uncompromising attempt to discover the truth about his father's implication in the shipment of defective airplane parts from his shop. Chris had always believed his father to be innocent and had faithfully defended him at all times. He had no evidence to indicate that his father had lied to him concerning his part in the affair. Not until George visited the Kellers did Chris begin to consider the possibility of his father's guilt. As soon as Chris's doubts were raised, he felt a burning desire to know the truth. In a sense he is comparable to Oedipus, who had a similar desire to uncover "the unclean thing." He was not a man who could remain passive in a crisis. He wanted to discover the truth, for he could not be content unless he felt that he was living in accordance with it. Dishonesty was incompatible with his sense of dignity. His first impulse when he heard the accusations of George was to silence him, but as he listened he began to realize the plausibility of George's explanations. Once Chris's curiosity was set in action he could not be stopped. He had to discover the truth. His

mother's remark, uttered in anger at Chris, revealed the situation to him. She stated that if Larry was dead, her husband killed him. This was too much for Chris. Strongly suspecting the truth, he turned to his father and read the guilt in his eyes. He was struck with horror:

Chris in a broken whisper: Then ... you did it?

Keller, with the beginning of plea in his voice: He never flew a P-40--

Chris, struck, deadly: But the others.

Keller, insistently: She's out of her mind.

Chris, unyielding: Dad ... you did it?

Keller: He never flew a P-40, what's the matter with you?

Chris, still asking, and saying: Then you did it. To the others.

Keller, afraid of him, his deadly insistence: What's the matter with you? What the hell is the matter with you?

Chris, quietly, incredibly: How could you do that? How?

Keller: What's the matter with you!

Chris: Dad ... Dad, you killed twenty-one men!

Keller: What, killed?

Chris: You killed them, you murdered them.

Keller, as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris: How could I kill anybody?

Chris: Dad! Dad!

Keller, trying to hush him: I didn't kill anybody!

Chris: Then explain it to me. What did you do? Explain it to me or I'll tear you to pieces!<sup>5</sup>

His father's explanation was not sufficient. It only infuriated Chris. The fact that his father tried to save the business for Chris did not

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

in the least excuse the action:

Chris, with burning fury: For me! When do you live, where have you come from? For me! --I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the Goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world--the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? 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?<sup>6</sup>

Chris despised his father's actions and wished he could do more to show his disgust and contempt. He deplored the fact that he did not have the courage to send his father to jail: "I could jail him! I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical now."<sup>7</sup> But Chris had acted. In fact, it was his pressing desire to discover the truth that provided the inciting force in the play. He could not passively accept the knowledge of his father's immoral behavior; he acted in a way which he thought was in accordance with dignity. To ignore the situation would have meant self-degradation.

In Death of a Salesman we also find a strained father-son relationship. This play was the story of a man who wanted to be "well-liked." When the play opened, Willy had just returned, weary and discontented, from a road trip. He was once a good salesman, but no longer did he seem to have the ability to sell his goods. To make up for this inability to sell, he lied about his success and borrowed money from his brother-in-law to show his wife that he had been successful. His wife knew the truth but never admitted it to Willy. Willy had two sons, one a "philandering bum" and the other a confused, maladjusted lad who had

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-16.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

been roaming from place to place out west working on farms. Biff, the vagabond, had always loved and respected his father until the day he went to Boston to see him and discovered him in a hotel room with a strange woman clad in a slip. Biff, feeling that his father was a "phony," became a dissolute wanderer. Willy was consumed with great dreams of popularity and success, but as he grew older he came to realize that they were not to be fulfilled. His entire life, however, was built on these unfulfilled dreams and hopes. To ease the frustration, he began living in two worlds, in one of which he was everything he dreamed. His greatest disappointment was Biff, his favorite son, whom he thought was spiting him. Biff, in turn, thought his father was an incorrigible dreamer who would never face the truth. This is reminiscent of the mother-son relationship in Tennessee William's The Glass Menagerie. Amanda thought Tom was not a loving, dutiful son, whereas Tom felt that his mother could not escape her world of dreams. No reconciliation could be made between Willy and Biff. One night Biff, ashamed of the way he had treated his father, convinced Willy that he truly loved him. Willy, amazed at the revelation, wanted to give him something in return. He envisioned what Biff could do with \$20,000. In an act of love Willy killed himself in a car wreck so that Biff could collect the insurance money.

Willy, of course, is the main character, about whom most of the action centers. His insatiable desire for popularity and success drove him forward in a hopeless search, as Captain Keeney in O'Neill's Ile is driven forward in a mad search for whales. Popularity and success were, to Willy, synonymous with dignity, and he considered himself a failure because they eluded him. His compulsion to act to secure them can easily be shown. When he was younger and his boys were still in high

school, he fabricated so many stories about his popularity that the boys worshipped him as a god. He bragged to Biff about his fame:

Willy: America is full of beautiful towns and fine, up-standing people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own.<sup>8</sup>

But as time passed and the boys grew older, the realization came upon him that he was not the man he wanted to be. He never really understood what went wrong. Slowly the foundation upon which his life was built began to disintegrate. Finally, he could not distinguish fact from fancy. He said to Linda: "Oh, I'll knock'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me."<sup>9</sup> To overcome his sense of failure, he devised a world of fancy in which everything was as he would want it. He lived in two worlds simultaneously. This is indicative of his inability to accept defeat passively. Although he was obviously a failure as a salesman, he refused to accept a job offered to him by his brother-in-law Charley. To accept this offer would be admitting defeat, which in turn would mean he had lost his dignity, for, as was mentioned above, dignity to Willy was success.

It slowly dawned on Willy that the only alternative left was suicide. This, if it did not bring him respect, would at least end his misery and degradation. He had contemplated suicide for some time and finally hid a section of rubber hose in the basement with which to asphyxiate himself. He ominously commented to Charley: "Funny, y'know?"

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive."<sup>10</sup> Soon a seemingly perfect opportunity arose for his suicide. Biff had just opened up his heart and confessed his love for his father. Willy was overwhelmed with ecstatic joy:

Willy, after a long pause, astonished, elevated: Isn't that--isn't that remarkable? Biff--he likes me!

Linda: He loves you, Willy.

Happy, deeply moved: Always did, Pop.

Willy: Oh, Biff! (Staring wildly) He cried! Cried to me. (He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise) That boy--that boy is going to be magnificent!<sup>11</sup>

Here, at last, he saw an opportunity to secure dignity, to find esteem in the eyes of his son. By sacrificing his life he thought that he was bequeathing to Biff the insurance money. And so, in an act of love, he committed suicide. He could not remain passive; he felt compelled to act in an attempt to gain dignity.

Biff is more a man of action than his father. Willy's suicide was his only really significant action. Biff was quite different. In the first part of his life he was a very confused and bewildered young man, unconscious of what he wanted. He had only a vague conception of how to act. But he knew that his father's life was false and meaningless, that his values were superficial. And so in the beginning he did nothing more than get away from his father. He went out west to work, not particularly in search of dignity so much as in an attempt to avoid associating with that that was "phony" and insincere. Even at this

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 218.

stage of his life he felt that dignity was incompatible with the type of dishonesty found in his father. He roamed from one place to another, always sensing that something was missing. He did not realize that he could not find happiness without feeling a harmony with his family.

When he returned home, we see him trying time after time to destroy Willy's world of fancy and to make him face reality. Biff wanted no part of his father's lies, for he understood that a man could not find dignity by denying the truth. But even when he came home it was obvious that he was still, to some extent, under the influence of his father's values. He told his brother of his feeling of guilt:

Biff: And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not gettin' anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin' my future. That's when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don't know what to do with myself. I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and everytime I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life.<sup>12</sup>

With a false sense of duty he promised his mother that he would get a job and work earnestly to please his father. But his primary goal was to force his father to face reality. It was Biff who had the courage to remove the rubber hose from the basement. He did everything possible to shatter Willy's dream world. At this time he began to realize that his own life had been meaningless and petty. He told Happy:

Biff: How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and--I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

But to realize this himself and live in accordance with the truth was not enough. He felt it necessary to make his father understand. And so, oblivious to the entreaties of Happy and his mother, he told his father that their relationship had been false and insincere. With determination he revealed to his father the truth. When Willy protested, Biff's zeal was increased: "All right, phony! Then let's lay it on the line."<sup>14</sup> He tried to make his father understand the truth, that which meant more than anything to Biff. In talking to Happy he asserted that "the man [Willy] don't know who we are! The man is gonna know!"<sup>15</sup> Biff, in a desperate attempt to make his father come to grips with reality, confessed his private thoughts and actions:

Biff: Now hear this, Willy, this is me.

Willy: I know you!

Biff: You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was in jail... I stole myself out of every good job since high school!

Willy: And whose fault is that?

Biff: And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!

Willy: I hear that! ...

Biff: It's goddam time you heard that! I had to be boss big shot in two weeks, and I'm through with it!

Willy: Then hang yourself! For spite, hang yourself!

Biff: No! Nobody's hanging himself, Willy! I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw--the sky. I saw the things that

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, What the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy? ... Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you! ... I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

Willy, directly to Biff: You vengeful, spiteful mut!

Biff, at the peak of his fury: Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all. ... Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?<sup>16</sup>

Biff did everything within his power to make the truth apparent to Willy. He abhorred falsity; he had to act in accordance with what he conceived to be morally right. The effect was, of course, disastrous, for it resulted in the death of Willy. But Biff, at any cost, felt that he must free himself from the shackles of falsehood and assert his individuality. That is, he was determined to live in accordance with his true nature.

A man similar to Biff in his respect for the truth is John Proctor in The Crucible. This play takes place in Salem in 1692. The illness of the daughter of the local minister, Reverend Parris, is the inciting action. The idea that perhaps she was under the influence of witches led to much talk of witchcraft. Ministers and clergymen from other towns were brought in to diagnose the case and determine whether there were any grounds to believe that Parris's daughter was under the spell

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 216-17.

of witches. It was discovered that many children had been dancing in the forest on the previous night; among them was Parris's daughter. The girls, to avoid punishment, maintained that they were under the control of an evil power. Finding that this made a considerable impression on the clergy, they began accusing innocent people of witchcraft. The accusations were upheld by many people in the community who would profit financially if their rivals were condemned as witches. The "crying out" of witches was rampant and no one was safe from the caprice of the girls. The leader of these girls, Abigail, had recently been employed in the home of John Proctor. She had been dismissed by Proctor's wife after she had been caught making love with John. For this reason Abigail was particularly desirous of accusing John's wife, thus eliminating the obstacle standing in her way of becoming the lover if not the wife of Proctor. Soon Goodie Proctor was accused and brought to trial. This so infuriated Proctor that he forced his new servant, one of the girls who was "crying out" the witches, to go to court and admit the absurdity and falsity of the witch hunt. This she did, but at court the officials intimidated her with threats of perjury, and the girls themselves rejected her. In desperation she turned against Proctor and "confessed" that he was allied with the devil. Proctor, himself in despair by now, claimed that Abigail was nothing but a whore. He confessed his sin with her and attempted to make the court realize her interest in the proceedings. When Goodie Proctor was presented to testify why she dismissed Abigail, she, to save her husband's reputation, refused to admit that Proctor had had an affair with Abigail. Too late did she discover that her husband had already confessed. Proctor was charged with witchcraft and condemned to die. All of the condemned people were given the opportunity to confess an alliance with the devil

and go free. Proctor, thinking that he was evil, considered making this confession for he knew it was wrong to abjure his belief in God by signing the confession. He felt that it was not right for him to be among the "saints" that were about to die. And so he did sign a written confession that he had seen the devil; but when he was told that it must be made public, he tore it to pieces in a fury, refusing to permit his name to be sullied in this manner. He went to his death courageously.

The ability to act courageously was the essence of Proctor's character. Nearly all that he did was in harmony with his strong set of moral convictions. All of his actions stemmed from his opposition to the "witch" trials, for he knew they were evil and unjust. The first action he took to combat the proceedings of the court was to remonstrate with Mary Warren, his servant. He tried to make her understand that "it's strange work for a Christian girl to hang old women!"<sup>17</sup> Next, when he was visited by Reverend Hale, who challenged his Christian character, he tried to explain that Abigail, the instigator of the charges, admitted to him that there was no witchcraft involved. Hale was astonished. His conviction that the trials were just and honest remained, but it was obviously shaken. When asked if he would testify in court, Proctor replied, "I--had not reckoned with goin' into court. But if I must I will."<sup>18</sup> Proctor's compulsion to act for what he believed to be right was strengthened when his wife was arrested by the court. He was openly defiant to the officers of the court who came to arrest her. He ripped up the warrant in contempt and refused to submit his wife to such degradation. Hale attempted to calm him, but he was

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

adamant:

Hale: Proctor, if she is innocent, the court--

Proctor: If she is innocent! Why do you never wonder if Parris be innocent, or Abigail? Is the accuser always holy now? Were they born this morning as clean as God's fingers? I'll tell you what's walking Salem--vengeance is walking Salem. We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law! This warrant's vengeance! I'll not give my wife to vengeance!<sup>19</sup>

But Proctor was forced to let his wife go. The fact that his wife was arrested infuriated him. At court he confessed that he had had sexual relations with Abigail, and that the key witness in the name of God was a whore. But when the charge was dismissed as false, Proctor himself was accused of trafficking with the devil and condemned to death.

It is during the last few hours, when Proctor was faced with imminent death, that he showed his character at its best. He finally consented to sign a confession, for he deemed it fitting that he, a sinner, should do that which was wrong and evil. He felt that he did not have the strength to do what was right, that is, accept death. But when he was made to understand that the confession was to be made public, he refused to assent to such disgrace. Do what they might to him, he would not permit his name to be defiled:

Proctor: You came to save my soul, did you not? Here! I have confessed myself; it is enough!

Danforth: You have not con--

Proctor: I have confessed myself! Is there no good penitence but it be public? God does not need my name upon the church! God sees my name; God knows how black my sins are! It is enough! ... You will not use me! I am no Sarah Good or Tituba, I am John Proctor! It is no part of salvation that you should use me! ... I have three

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

children--how may I teach them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends?

Danforth: You have not sold your friends--

Proctor: Beguile me not! I blacken all of them when this is nailed to the church the very day they hang for silence!

Danforth: Mr. Proctor, I must have good and legal proof that you--

Proctor: You are the high court, your word is good enough! Tell them I confessed myself; say Proctor broke his knees and wept like a woman; say what you will, but my name cannot-- ...

Danforth: Why? Do you mean to deny this confession when you are free?

Proctor: I mean to deny nothing!

Danforth: Then explain to me, Mr. Proctor, why you will not let--

Proctor, with a cry of his whole soul: 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 with my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!<sup>20</sup>

Proctor wanted his name, his individuality. This meant more to him than his life. He was willing to sacrifice everything in order to maintain his integrity. He acted in accordance with what he believed to be right, regardless of the consequences. This, to Proctor, was dignity.

In A View from the Bridge we find the same basic theme--a protagonist who was desperately struggling for dignity. The play centered around Eddie Carbone: his repressed love for his niece and his antagonism toward Rodolpho, the younger of the two Sicilian immigrants living with Eddie and his family. Catherine, Eddie's niece, was

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 327-28.

an adolescent who wanted to go out and find a job. Eddie, wanting to protect her, found objections to all her plans. He would not admit that she was growing up and no longer needed his protection. At this time two relatives of his wife made an illegal entry into the United States from Sicily to make some money with which to support themselves and their family back home. Marco, a tall, powerful man, was respected and liked by everyone. Rodolpho, his younger brother, did not meet with such unanimous approval. He was more effeminate, both in appearance and actions. Not only did he joke and sing, he cooked and even sewed. Catherine was immediately attracted to him, but Eddie disliked him. When Eddie saw that Catherine had a real and growing affection for Rodolpho, he attempted to poison her against him. He said that this foreigner only wanted a means to become an American, that he was not really concerned for Catherine. But his wiles had no effect. Finally, in desperation, he reported the two brothers to the Immigration Bureau. As they were arrested, Marco reviled him and spit in his face. Eddie was infuriated and wanted revenge. Meanwhile, Catherine had agreed to marry Rodolpho, and Marco was released on parole to attend the wedding. Eddie challenged him and Marco responded. When Eddie pulled out a knife, Marco was able to turn the blade inward and drive it home. Eddie fell dead in the street.

We are horrified at the extremes to which Eddie went in his attempt at fulfillment, an attempt which ultimately led to his death. There were many examples throughout the play that indicated his compulsion to act in the face of what seemed to degrade him. His treatment of Rodolpho showed his fear that he, a strong and rugged man, would be superseded by the effeminate Sicilian as the protector of Catherine. He fought with all his power to prevent this from happening. He

ridiculed Rodolpho before Catherine, he degraded him, and finally, seeing that he had failed to affect Catherine's affection for him, he attempted to poison her against Rodolpho:

Catherine: What've you got against him, Eddie? Please tell me. What?

Eddie: He don't respect you. ... Katie, he's only bowin' to his passport.

Catherine: His passport!

Eddie: That's right. He marries you he's got the right to be an American citizen. That's what's goin' on here. (She is puzzled and surprised.) You understand what I'm tellin' you? The guy is lookin' for his break, that's all he's lookin' for.... Is that a workin' man? What does he do with his first money? A snappy new jacket he buys, records, a pointy pair new shoes and his brother's kids are starvin' over there with tuberculosis? That's a hit-and-run guy, baby; he's got bright lights in his head, Broadway. Them guys don't think of nobody but theirselves! You marry him and the next time you see him it'll be for divorce! ...

Catherine: No, I don't believe it.... He loves me!

Eddie, with deep alarm: Don't say that, for God's sake! This is the oldest racket in the country---... They been pullin' this since the Immigration Law was put in! They grab a green kid that don't know nothin' and they--

Catherine, sobbing: I don't believe it and I wish to hell you'd stop it!<sup>21</sup>

When Eddie saw that this was failing, he tried a new tactic: he went to see a lawyer about the legality of his niece marrying a boy that "ain't right." Here, too, he failed to find a satisfactory solution, for there was no law that could be applied. Next he tried to humiliate Rodolpho in front of Catherine. One time, while "teaching" him to box, he staggered him with a hard blow to the head. On another occasion he kissed Rodolpho to mock his effeminacy. But it was to no avail. Catherine's feelings were unchanged. Finally, in despair, he reported

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 402-04.

the brothers to the Immigration Bureau. He knew that such an action violated the moral code by which he and his friends lived; reporting illegal immigrants was the most loathsome act that could be done. But he was so obsessed with the fear of being degraded that this consideration seemed insignificant. He wanted his dignity at any price. The final insult that turned him into a raging beast was Marco's response to his betrayal. When Marco cursed him and spit in his face, Eddie was driven like a ferocious animal to retaliate against this degradation. He wanted his "name." Marco had to apologize; only this would satisfy Eddie.

Eddie: Wipin' the neighborhood with my name like a dirty rag! I want my name, Marco. Now gimme my name and we go to the wedding.<sup>22</sup>

Eddie died fighting for his dignity. His "name" was his most important possession. When he had lost his "name," he had lost his identity.

All of the characters in this study, to varying degrees, are men who struggle passionately for a sense of worth. None of them are Prufrocks who are paralyzed into passivity. Instead, they assail with an astonishing force that which seems to stand in their way. From Joe Keller to Eddie Carbone we see men who are struggling for a sense of dignity. Their actions are quite different, but they are directed at the same thing--finding dignity. But this is not to be had for the asking. All of the men are not entirely successful in achieving what they so zealously pursue. Whether or not these characters secured a sense of worth, and if so, to what extent, needs to be determined.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 438.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters it was determined that all of the characters of this study desired dignity. Although their respective concepts of it differed considerably, they all wanted to find a sense of worth. It was shown, too, that these men all acted to secure this dignity. None of them submitted passively to a challenge to their sense of self-respect. They struggled against that which opposed them. Now the problem inevitably arises: did these men actually find dignity? Did they discover a sense of worth? The question is not easily answered, for the extent to which these men succeeded varies from character to character. Some found what they were seeking; others failed dismally. But in either case there was a certain nobility in their effort itself, regardless of its success. With this in mind, let us examine the characters individually.

Joe Keller was interested in attaining the respect and love of his family by reaching a harmonious relationship with his wife and son. The wants, the needs, the sufferings of the rest of mankind were beyond his imagination; so he concerned himself with gaining the admiration of his family. For quite some time he was successful. But when he was faced with financial ruin, he acted ignobly and dishonestly to maintain what he thought was his dignity. Because he transgressed a moral law, the results were disastrous. No longer did he have the real respect of

his wife, who knew the truth of his actions. And as soon as Chris discovered the truth, Joe lost all sense of self-respect. His family turned against him. This, of course, meant utter defeat to him. He was shorn of his last shred of respect. His suicide is ample proof of this. In one last effort he tried to do something noble--kill himself--but the result was ineffectual. His suicide was meaningless. And so it is not difficult to determine that Joe did not secure the dignity that he so arduously fought for. His willingness to act dishonestly stripped him of that which he prized most, his sense of worth.

Chris, his son, was quite different. Throughout the play he was interested in living in accordance with what he conceived to be the truth. He understood meaningful values in life, such as love, honesty, and courage, and attempted to incorporate them into a code by which to live. He could not be shaken from his convictions. It is in this courage and honesty that we find a basis for real dignity in Miller's characters. The fact that Joe violated his code of ethics did not in any way alter Chris's adherence to it. Chris was forced, instead, to condemn his father's actions. The ties between father and son melted before Chris's burning desire to do that which was right. His moral convictions did not yield. Because of this, it can be said that Chris attained the dignity that he was struggling for. His fight for dignity, however, was costly--his mother suffered mentally and his father committed suicide--but the fight was successful. The price he paid only made his dignity more precious to him. The fact that Chris maintained a sense of worth is what is significant.

Willy Loman was not so successful as Chris in attaining his goals. To Willy, dignity lay in the ability to be "well-liked." Success and popularity were the key to a sense of worth. And so throughout his

his life he strove to secure them. Because of this he lost sight of more meaningful values. He was caught up by these false values to such an extent that he was helpless to free himself from them. He concocted a world of fancy to compensate for the defeats he was suffering in life. Throughout his life he lived in bewilderment and confusion, never really understanding his relationship to other men. As Biff said at Willy's grave, "He never knew who he was."<sup>1</sup> This is the essence of the problem: Willy never looked at himself honestly, never saw the discord between his real nature and the life he was pursuing. Arthur Miller commented on this failure:

Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman went through the same process [as Proctor], but, because he had lost Proctor's sense of personal inviolability and had yielded completely to every pressure, he never found out who he was.<sup>2</sup>

Willy saw that he had lost his sense of dignity; this was one reason for his suicide. He saw at the last one final chance to gain the love and respect of his son. Willy was almost transfigured by his motive in suicide, but because he obviously died cherishing his false ideals, it was nearly meaningless. The small degree of dignity that he did acquire was gained by sacrificing for his son, but because the sacrifice was not a worthy one, he actually failed to gain the sense of worth he so desperately sought.

Biff was much more similar to Chris than to Willy in respect to the extent to which he attained dignity. As soon as Biff understood that his father was a "phony," he set out on his own to see the world. While working on farms in the west, he came to the realization that he

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Plays, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Hewes, "Arthur Miller and How He Went to the Devil," p. 25.

was happy living a simple and wholesome life. He further realized that the demands of society often produced suffering and unhappiness in people. But he could not make his father understand this that was so evident to him. Although this effort contributed to his father's death, Biff was doing what he knew was right. Because he lived in accordance with truth, he secured dignity. In other words, he found who he was. He accepted the fact that he was not meant to be a great man, or even a "successful" or "popular" man. Willy never understood this. And this was the essential difference between the two. Biff attained a sense of worth through his willingness to accept and live in accordance with his true nature. Willy could not do this. He persisted in dreaming. Through Biff's desire to find the truth and his unwillingness to compromise, he discovered who he was; that is, he found dignity.

Proctor was comparable to Biff in his consuming desire to do what was right. Most of his actions indicated this. His aversion to Reverend Farris, his attempt to make his servant girl realize the injustice of the court proceedings, his utter contempt of the court, his confession of adultery--all these exemplified his moral character. His final action, when he destroyed the confession of complicity with the devil, was the one in which he secured real dignity. He was able to discern what was petty and meaningless and to act in accordance with what he conceived to be right. Arthur Miller explained this in his comment on the play:

Proctor acts and has to face the consequence of his actions. In so doing he discovers who he is.... That's what Proctor means near the end of the play when he talks about his "name." He is really speaking about his identity, which he cannot surrender.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Proctor did achieve dignity. He was more successful than any other character in this study in finding this sense of worth. This success is due to the extent to which he was willing to go, the sacrifice of his life, to act in accordance with what he believed. He died with respect and dignity, for he knew who he was.

Eddie, however, was not so successful. Although, in effect, he also sacrificed his life to maintain his "name," his death had little meaning. That is, his conception of dignity did not embody a desire to act in accordance with his true nature. Instead it was the fear of being stepped on and the need to assert himself. When Rodolpho won the love of Catherine, he was crestfallen. But Marco's insults were an affront to his manliness, what he conceived of as his dignity. We are amazed at his reaction. In respect to this Arthur Miller commented:

A View from the Bridge is not designed primarily to draw tears or laughter from an audience but to strike a particular note of astonishment at the way in which, and the reasons for which, a man will endanger and risk and lose his very life.<sup>4</sup>

Eddie thought that he was defending his dignity by challenging Marco, and to a certain extent he did; but for the most part his death was meaningless. Because his values were shallow and petty, he never really achieved dignity.

All of these characters found some degree of self-knowledge and integrity. In Joe Keller, Willy, and Eddie the awareness was superficial. None of these men ever discovered who he really was. The only dignity that these men discovered, shallow as it was, came from the fact that they did struggle to become better, to assert their indivi-

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<sup>4</sup>Arthur Miller, A View from the Bridge, (New York, 1956), p. 18 of introduction.

duality. But because their actions were basically selfish, they failed. Chris, Biff, and Proctor, however, did acquire dignity. Their search was rewarded by self-fulfillment. All three of these men, at the end, knew who they were; they understood themselves in relation to society. And this is due to a great extent to the fact that they were able to go beyond their selfish desires and acquire a "feeling for the world," to recognize something greater than the individual. The realization resulted in the death of Proctor, but Chris and Biff survived to accept the responsibility of living in accordance with their real nature.

Now that the extent to which these men triumphed has been determined, the question arises: what do these conclusions signify? What is Miller trying to express by the treatment of his characters in their struggle?

First, it shows Miller's attitude toward man. By portraying man in his struggle for dignity, Miller seems to affirm his belief in the perfectibility of man. He shows this belief by confronting his characters with circumstances that seem to degrade them and then by causing them to fight, even to death, to maintain or regain, as the case may be, their dignity. In this sense Miller is an optimist. Although some of his characters are ultimately defeated, the very fact that they continue to struggle for dignity indicates Miller's belief in the basic worth of man. It is not the result of the struggle but rather the fact that these men would sacrifice everything, even their lives, to secure dignity that is important. Man is no petty being without noble aspirations, ideals, or a desire for self-improvement. He need not be a sniveling coward forced into passivity by the futility of retaliating against adverse forces. Instead, man--common man--is quite capable of asserting himself and fighting for what is rightfully his. And to the extent that he does struggle against degrading circumstances is he able to secure

dignity. There is something both awesome and admirable about a man who stands up, Prometheus-like, to assert his individuality and struggle for his sense of right.

But not all of these characters achieve this integrity. This indicates that laying down one's life for what he believes is not sufficient. Something else is necessary--the intrinsic worth or universality of the goal for which the sacrifice is made. That is, one must struggle for that which is truly meaningful if dignity is to be achieved. Miller is saying that men must realize an obligation to live in accordance with their real nature. This obligation embodies the knowledge that man is one with all others, that only through harmony and love can fulfillment be achieved. For this reason Joe, Willy, and Eddie fail to acquire any real dignity. But Chris, Biff, and Proctor succeed, for they at the end can identify with all men. This, in effect, is understanding who one is. The answer is made apparent only to Chris, Biff, and Proctor. They discover the truth: all men are brothers. This realization is essential to dignity.

Second, Miller is attempting to show that the present state of man's moral turpitude is at least partially due to the corrupting influences of our society. He is dealing with the relationship of man to society. For this reason he has been called "our one important social dramatist."<sup>5</sup> He is not so interested in the psychological implications of a situation as is his contemporary, Tennessee Williams; Miller is primarily concerned with the social implications. Williams seems much more interested in delving into a psychological analysis of abnormal

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<sup>5</sup>Arthur Miller, The Crucible, (New York, 1959), p. xi of "Introduction" by Richard Watts, Jr.

individuals than in dealing with any social problems. In typical plays such as A Streetcar Named Desire, The Rose Tattoo, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, to name but three, no social questions are broached. On the other hand, Miller, although certainly concerned with a realistic portrayal of his characters, is also obviously interested in the social problems present in any given situation. Many difficulties that Miller's characters face stem from their conflict with social values. Joe Keller and Willy no less than Proctor are destroyed by their environment. In another society these men would not have met with the same fate. What Miller is saying in The Crucible is obvious. It is not so much an attack on the specific values of society as it is a condemnation of those forces that inhibit individuality and intellectual growth. In All My Sons and Death of a Salesman the target is somewhat different. In these he shows men being destroyed by assuming the delusive values of a materialistic society. The image of success for Joe and Willy is merely a reflection of the values of society. Both men transgress obvious moral laws in their obsessive desire for acceptance. Miller, doubtless, is saying that a man cannot find dignity while at the same time embracing these false values.

Miller's desire to treat the dignity of man in his plays indicates that he is one of the most serious dramatists in the world today. None of his contemporaries in the United States--Odets, Hellman, Williams, Inge--have confronted the question of man's dignity so squarely. I think that it is his preoccupation with human dignity and his position on it, the position that I have examined in this paper, that has contributed greatly to his reputation in the American theatre.

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VITA

Roger Norman Freling

Candidate for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Thesis: A STUDY OF THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAYS

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, May 15, 1936, the son of N. N. and Doris E. Freling.

Education: Attended grade school in Bartlesville, Oklahoma; graduated from Bartlesville High School in 1954; received the Bachelor of Science degree from Oklahoma State University, with a major in Industrial Engineering, in May, 1959; completed requirements for Master of Arts degree in May, 1961.

Professional Experience: Worked during summer months of 1953, 1954, 1955, and 1956 as draftsman for Phillips Petroleum Company, Bartlesville, Oklahoma; accepted Graduate Assistantship in English at Oklahoma State University in 1959-1960; taught as full-time instructor of English at same University in 1960-1961.