Three Plays by Arthur Miller in the Context of Cultural Materialism

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To my family and friends,
for their infinite love
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Table of Contents

Examination Committee ii

Dedication iii

Acknowledgements iv

Table of Contents v

Abstract vi

Introduction 1

Chapter One: 5
Cultural Materialism: A Critical Background

Chapter Two: 21
A View from the Bridge: The Ethnic Group’s Culture and the Hidden Forces

Chapter Three: 55
Death of a Salesman: The American Culture through the Eyes of a “Little Man”

Chapter Four: 85
All My Sons: The Postwar Period and the Sense of Responsibility

Conclusion 117

Bibliography 120

Abstract in Arabic 127
Many critics have examined Arthur Miller’s plays from different viewpoints, but they have not shown a real interest in studying those active sociological relations amounting to a cultural dynamism, which, if examined carefully, leads to a re-examination of our reading of the plays quite remarkably. Thereby, this thesis attempts to explore such relations, as it implores Raymond Williams’s efforts in this regard. Williams revises the Marxist Cultural theory, and provides a methodology for the analysis of literary works. In view of that, Miller’s *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *A View from a Bridge* (1955, revised 1956) are reread in the context of Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism, as Miller’s plays offer a rich milieu for social interaction and relations.

This thesis examines a variety of relationships, which an individual establishes and develops in the domain of his/ her culture, which is either subordinated or dominant, and looks at the pressures that work together in the various aspects of the social order. Viewing one aspect only is hardly enough for a thorough comprehension of the protagonists’ choices of alternatives. Only a few critics have considered the necessity of perceiving an individual’s struggle within that primacy of culture and not within one or two of its components. Thus, in this thesis, each play epitomizes the different layers of a dynamic social order.
Along these lines, this study attempts to offer a potent understanding of the concrete conditions that determine the character’s life. In the context of cultural materialism, the text is looked at in relation to the world beyond it. Accordingly, these three plays reflect and question a period that extends from 1886 to the 1950s and highlight some of America’s compelling historic and social moments.
Introduction

This thesis endeavors to present a contextualized study of three plays by Arthur Miller (1915-): *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955, revised 1956). The approach employed in this study is called cultural materialism. The fundamental characteristic of this approach lies in its combination of three dimensions: The theoretical, textual, and historical. Thus, the analysis is conducted at three levels, which leads to a thorough understanding of each work. These three dimensions bring depth to the study, which is based on the work of the British leftist critic Raymond Williams (1921-1988). Williams analyzes the social, political, psychological, and economic practices, which in their continuous interaction and change create a sense of dynamism and wholeness that characterizes life.

Critics have examined Miller’s work from numerous perspectives. They have explored his work in general, in terms of form and content. There have also been some recent studies that deal with particular issues. Miller’s plays have offered a tempting locale for exploring the sociological and psychological grounds as well as gender studies and cross-cultural studies that have been not long conducted. Critics have not, however, studied *All My Sons, Death of Salesman, and A View from the Bridge* in the context of cultural materialism. Even Williams himself has discussed Miller’s plays only in terms of realism in “The Realism of Arthur Miller” (1959) and the liberal hero in *Modern Tragedy* (1966).

My argument is that Miller’s three plays present a suitable domain for the conflicts within a particular dominant culture that cultural materialism successfully analyzes. In this context, each play exhibits the sociological dynamics of a culture at a particular historic moment. Most of these aspects may have been explored before
but not in terms of their relation to the dynamic model of culture, as proposed by Williams.

The fundamental nature of this model lies in its ability to describe the social relations in their dynamic forms. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julia Rivkin and Michael Ryan reveal that cultural materialism “focuses on the sociological dynamics of culture as well as on what Williams calls ‘structures of feeling’” (240). In the course of the presentation of cultural materialism, both of the dynamic relations and the structure of feeling will be looked at in detail. The dynamic model illuminates the structure of feeling, which is the dominant culture, in each of the three plays.

The first chapter provides a historical and a critical background for the approach. It uncovers the nature of cultural materialism, as it discovers its origin in England in the 1970s and seeks to detect the different phases of its evolution. Furthermore, it places cultural materialism in the discipline of cultural studies.

The first chapter also sketches the main lines of Williams’s cultural materialism. At the theoretical level, the plays are tackled according to Raymond Williams’s theory of culture. Society is looked at in terms of domination and subordination. A play either reflects the tension between a dominant and a subordinated social order or it may reveal the conflicts within the same social order.

However, the sociological forms within the social orders are viewed in terms of their dynamic nature, as they interact in the different aspects of culture. Not many critics have been interested in studying the dynamic relations in the text, and to find their effects on the protagonists’ resolutions. In Williams’s dynamic model of culture, the reader grasps a thorough picture of the structure of feeling of the plays examined.
Once the social order or the culture is identified, then, the aspects of that culture are examined. In this part, it is also likely to spot the relationships, which lie at every layer of culture. Those relationships express tensions and conflicts and help in tracing the values and practices at work in any structure of feeling, as they are of a dynamic nature. Most critics do not realize that certain needs enforce social actions, and that the changes within the society result in newly formed responses and actions.

At the textual level, this study is interested in the generic forms of the work of art. This part assesses the internal construction of a play in terms of the content and the form. It also searches for the breaks beyond a certain form or developments of that form in an attempt to portray the inner and outer framework of a text.

At the historical level, the plays are considered as the products of the conditions and means of their production that take a part in the creation of forms and contents. Williams suggests that a work of art articulates the changes on the social level, and so this dimension explains why a certain form is employed in the text. Thereby, the reasons that explain the development of a certain form of a work of art are related to this historical dimension. This feature also shows concerns about the changes in the techniques of performance, the kind of the audience, and the formation, which is the movement that the author belongs to. Thus, the work of art is not isolated from the world beyond.

A good example of such a development is the bourgeois drama, which is a reflection of the emerging middle class in the eighteenth century, as Williams observes (1995, 163). Before this kind of form, the dominant kind of drama was the Renaissance drama that expressed the social relations of that time. Thus, at the core of this dimension lies an interest in the original means and conditions of the production of a work of art.
Furthermore, it is relevant to explain the ways these plays are arranged. The plays are not looked at chronologically. On the contrary, the focus moves from the subordination to domination. The thesis first examines the relationship between a subordinated and a dominant social order. Then, in the two following chapters, it examines the clashes within the same social order.

*A View from the Bridge* is a good example of the tensions between a subordinated class and a dominant class. More importantly, this play employs the bourgeois naturalist form along with the subjective expressionist form. The same blend of form is found in *Death of a Salesman*; therefore, it becomes the second play to be discussed. But this play depicts the dominant social group, and so the tensions are examined within the same group. Like *Death of a Salesman,* *All My Sons* portrays one single dominant social group, but this play uses a strict bourgeois naturalist form.

To put it briefly, in the three plays, the dynamic nature of the values and practices of a social group that are found in a particular “structure of feeling,” as Williams calls it, are at the center of attention of this thesis (1985, 131). Each play presents a number of either newly growing practices and notions or some gradually fading practices.
Chapter One

Cultural Materialism: A Critical Background

This chapter, first, looks at the origins of cultural materialism and at its many stages. It also touches upon some fundamental concepts and upon critics who reviewed Williams’s works. Moreover, it locates cultural materialism in the discipline of cultural studies.


Cultural materialism, first of all, is a Marxist approach. This critical approach, along with the reflection theory, is one of the three major strands of Marxist criticism. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julia Rivkin and Michael Ryan believe that the other two are the “Frankfurt School” and Structuralist criticism (239). They also point out that at the core of Marxist literary criticism is an interest in the “embeddedness of a work within its historical, social, and economic contexts” (238).

Cultural materialism is the result of Raymond Williams’s revision of the Marxist cultural theory in the 1970s. In *Criticism and Literary Theory: 1890 to the Present*, Chris Baldick observes that 1968 was characterized by a “renaissance of Marxist cultural theory,” which was promoted by the “rediscovery of the intellectual traditions of ‘Western Marxism’ of the writings of Gramsci, Lukacs, Benjamin … Sartre, Adorno, Marcuse, and Althusser” (178).
The understanding of the origins of the term cultural materialism is also of great relevance. In fact, the term cultural refers to Williams’s version of the cultural theory, as John Higgins observes in *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism* (125). The cultural theory, which is originally presented in the Marxist approach, emphasizes the primary role of economy, and grants the cultural activities and productions a secondary role; by contrast, Williams strongly advocates the supremacy of culture.

In the Marxist theory, the base, which represents the economy, determines the other activities and practices that are referred to as the superstructure. Williams found out that all aspects of culture are of equal importance. In doing so, he proposed the dynamic nature of culture rather than the static nature of the base.

It is in the year 1977 with the publication of *Marxism and Literature* that Williams declared his new Marxist position. In fact, what Williams has done is a revision of the Marxist cultural theory. According to Williams, Karl Marx’s model reduces the cultural theory to an object whereas it should be taken as a process.

As for the significance of the term “materialism,” Higgins believes that it articulates Williams’s “response to the theory and practice of literary analysis at work in the existing institutions of English studies” (125). Higgins describes this theory and practice as “bourgeois in nature and effect” (125). Moreover, the principles of Williams’s project of the cultural materialism are the same principles, which Williams elaborated as “the theoretical and disciplinary critique of Cambridge English,” in the “third” part of *Marxism and Literature* (126).

Chris Baldick raises another insight into the issue of materiality. In *Criticism and Literary Theory: 1890 to the Present*, Baldick acknowledges that for Williams, “culture was fully material” (179). Baldick ascertains that the “materiality of cultural
forms inspired him [Williams] to describe his method as one of ‘cultural materialism,’
the distinctive point of which is to examine culture not simply in terms of its products
but in the context of its material conditions of production[,] as he puts it in a 1973
essay” (179). This issue of the importance of the means of production will be
examined in the part that deals with the historical dimension of cultural materialism.

Hence, these principles of cultural materialism were first outlined in Williams’s
famous essay entitled “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”
published in 1973. This essay was expanded in Williams’s Marxism and Literature
(1977). John Higgins and Catherine Gallagher believe that this project was further
expanded in a rather neglected work of Raymond Williams called Culture or The
Sociology of Culture (1981), as the title appears in the American version.

Furthermore, Williams proposes definitions for cultural materialism and culture.
In an essay entitled “Crisis in English Studies,” published in Writing in Society,
Williams defines cultural materialism as “the analysis of all forms of signification,
including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their
production” (210). In The Sociology of Culture, Williams defines culture as “the
signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social
order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (1995,13). Earlier,
Williams has viewed culture as a “whole way of life” (1979, 16).

Higgins pinpoints that “[t]he task of cultural materialism was to attend to that
constitutive role of signification within cultural process, and so to integrate the three
usually separated dimensions of textual, theoretical, and historical analysis” (135).
These three dimensions would be explored one at a time in every play. The first
dimension is the theoretical, which is related to the cultural theory.
Thus, cultural materialism is a Marxist approach. Its focal point is the description of the dynamics of culture and the structure of feeling. The dynamic model of culture is of great importance, as it allows viewing culture in terms of a process. Williams argues that a dominant culture consists of emergent and residual values and practices. Another interesting proposition is the fact that an emergent culture usually replaces a dominant one. In other words, this model projects the endlessly changed nature of the sociological practices within any culture. This thesis attempts to bring these dynamic forms to the surface.

Hence, it is also of great importance to thoroughly look this model over. The foundations of this proposition were first sketched in “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” in which Williams views the residual as “some experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture,” but that “are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of residue—of some previous social formation” (1989, 384).

So the residual is the element that has been “formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (1985, 122). He further explains the term as “work made in earlier and often in different societies and time” (1995, 204). Raymond Williams also draws the attention to the fact that “a residual culture is usually at some distance from the effective dominant culture”; nevertheless, it has the chance of being “incorporated” into that effective culture (1989, 385).

On the other hand, the emergent, according to Williams, refers to the “new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences,” that “are continually being created” (1989, 385). Accordingly, the emergent is the new work.


____________. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, Croom Helm.


Miller’s Death of a Salesman: Bloom’s Notes. Chelsea House, Broomall.
Arthur Miller, in full Arthur Asher Miller, (born October 17, 1915, New York, New York, U.S.—died February 10, 2005, Roxbury, Connecticut), American playwright, who combined social awareness with a searching concern for his characters’ inner lives. He is best known for Death of a Salesman (1949). Top Questions. American playwright Arthur Miller was born and raised in New York City, where his father owned a successful manufacturing business. The Great Depression, however, brought financial ruin onto his father, demonstrating to the young Miller the insecurity of modern existence. When did Arthur Miller die? American playwright Arthur Miller died on February 10, 2005, in Roxbury, Connecticut. He was 89 years old. He died of heart failure. Arthur Miller’s plays are about faithfully representing the struggles of middle-class families in post-war America. The major theme of his early work is a critique of the American Dream as an ideological apparatus. All My Sons and Death of a Salesman both show the tragic consequences of everymen pursuing the American Dream. 10 Characteristics of His Writings/Beliefs Explores psychological and social issues that emerged in the political and cultural landscape of post-WWII America: - the dangers of rampant materialism - the struggle for dignity in a dehumanizing world - the erosion of the family structure - and the perils of. Arthur Miller saw the Great Depression and the years after as a period of moral catastrophe. His understanding of American hucksterism, greed and shame could hardly be more relevant in Trump’s world. Such government loans gave a man named Fred Trump his start in the property business during the 1940s, when he borrowed sums he was later forced to concede before a congressional inquiry had been wildly inflated. He used these inflated loans to develop housing projects that became the foundation of the Trump Organization, which would be sued for racial discrimination by the US Department of Justice in 1973, two years after Fred’s son Donald took over the business.