

## A Biographical Look into Arthur Miller's Understanding of Wives and Mothers

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### Abstract

The article attempts to examine Arthur Miller's biographical background especially his mother, his wives and the other women around him and investigate his relationship with them in order to gain a better understanding of the wife and mother figures in Miller's plays. Seen from the more general background, Miller's particular outlook on wives and mothers is influenced greatly by his biographical background. His mother's struggle with his father and her desire for knowledge as well as her courage and strength in the economic crisis, together with his own three marriages, especially his tremulous life with the sex symbol Marilyn Monroe and also all the other women around him all contribute to his shaping of authentic and complex wife and mother images in his plays.

**Key words:** Arthur Miller; Understanding; Mothers; Wives

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### INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller, just like many other great playwrights, is also eager to present his life and experience in his

plays. As he admits in an interview, "the plays are my autobiography. I can't write plays that don't sum up where I am. I am in all of them. I don't know how else to go about writing" (Biggsby, *Cambridge*, 1997, p. 1). A number of scholars and critics have also pointed out autobiographical elements in Miller's work. Harold Clurman (1969) notes, "the artist creates his biography through his work even as the events of his life serve to shape him" (p. 143). Neil Carson (1982) further confirms Clurman's views, and says, "to a greater extent than most, perhaps, Miller's art has always been a reflection of his life" (p. 31). In fact, many of Miller's characterizations parallel his own family members and the persons he knows. The familial father-sons and brother-brother conflicts in his plays, such as *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Price*, reflect his own family relationship. His most autobiographical play *After the Fall* shows us his tangled relationship with his mother, his father, his brother, and his three wives. Dissertationist James K. Flanagan (1969), after he has studied the connection between Miller's life and works, focusing on the playwright's portray of families, society and women, theorizes that "Miller's drama is indeed influenced by events of his personal life, such as the Depression, his political activities and his relationship with women" (p. 158). Hence, it is necessary for us to look at his biological background especially his mother, his wives and the other women around him and investigate his relationship with them in order to gain a better understanding of the wife and mother figures in Miller's plays.

### 1. MILLER AND HIS MOTHER

It is beyond dispute that Miller has been influenced first and foremost by his mother. Miller's mother, Augusta Barnett Miller, a first-generation American born in New York, had been trade into an arranged marriage, within

months of graduating cum laude from high school. She was pretty and clever, and was the brightest one in the family. She was the only one who could play, as Miller (1995) recalls in his autobiography *Timebends*, “she also can play and sing in soprano so proper and romantic and fashionable” (p. 4). As Miller writes, “I could recall none but my mother who ever read anything” (p. 17), his mother loved books, and was also the only member in or out of the family who ever read books. Augusta even paid for a teacher in home to talk with her about novels.

In quite contrast to her, her husband, Isidore Miller, who had built one of the two or three largest coat manufacturing businesses in the country at the time, was a man who cannot read or write any language. Even so, August still showed her loyalty to her husband, speaking of him almost always with respect and praise when he was in full power. In the mid-twenties, they kept a concordant and happy relationship with each other. However, meantime, she despised the mean-spirited, money-mad persons and those for whom business was a total world, so she subverted Isidore, a businessman committed to the values of business. When the Crash came, she showed her anger at the waning of his powers, and held a certain sneering contempt for him in her voice.

Nevertheless, she was the pillar in the family and the stronger in life. When her husband became helpless during the Economic Crisis, Augusta was valiantly pitching in to save their children, cutting down on every expenditure and intelligently budgeting the household. And finally, she initiated to move to a small house in Brooklyn paid by mortgage. By 1932, she had to charm the man in the bank in order to extend one month’s mortgage payment into the next. By the early thirties, nearly all her disposable pieces of jewelry had been pawned or sold. In order to feed her child, she even made meal money at high-stakes professional bridge games all over Midwood and Flatbush, which were sometimes raided by the police. When she arrived at the bottom of the Depression, she even tried to get arrested for trying to make a dollar. All in all, she tried everything to live through the calamity because she deeply believed that with sufficient intelligence a person could outwit the situation.

Miller takes after his mother in many aspects. In appearances, Miller and his mother are the only dark-eyed members in their large family. And both of them are imaginative, are keen on books and literature, and can sing well. In addition, they also share the same romantic ideas and similar values. As Miller explains, his mother and he are linked not only in appearance but in “our outspoken conspiracy against the constraints and prohibitions of reality” (p. 75).

Miller is also greatly affected by his mother. He frankly admitted his mother to be his primal teacher, who not only taught him how to perceive his experiences, but also led him through many events happening around him, such as the excitement of the Jazz Age and the first

stage play he had saw. However, the influence which his mother exerts on him is not always positive in Miller’s views. Her mysticism, especially her dark and pessimistic surges, had prejudiced Miller against teaching his own children religion. Augusta dissatisfaction with her illiterate husband led her to put high expectation on her children, especially her younger son, Arthur Miller. She also innocently tempted Miller away from his husband. Later, in becoming a writer, Miller was aware that he was choosing sides between his parents. And finally, he chose to stand by his mother, as he acknowledges,

To become a reader meant to surpass him [his father], and to claim the status of a writer was a bloody triumph; it was also a dangerously close identification with my mother and her secret resentment, if not contempt, for his stubborn incapacity with words. (ibid, p. 19)

Nevertheless, Miller’s feelings for his mother are mixed. On the one hand, he appreciates his mother’s unconditional love for her children, esteems her motherly tenderness, sacrifice and tolerance, and admires her strength and courage; on the other hand, Miller is cramped by her thwarted ambitions and domineering nature, and perplexed and deeply hurt by her cruelty.

In a word, Augusta Miller is a woman “who moves with the times” (ibid, p. 4), a woman with a strong heart, and a woman who have a profound impact on Arthur Miller’s life and works. For Miller, many wife and mother figures in his dramas are the prototypes of his mother. In *Timebends*, his autobiography, he openly acknowledges, “his style as a playwright had been influenced by his mother greatly” (ibid, p. 36). And many famous critics have confirmed this point. Harold Clurman (1969) first identifies The Mother – Kate Keller in *All My Sons* with Miller’s own mother. Subsequently, Christopher Bigsby (1992) also notes, “his mother was still exercising its power over his imagination in the 1960s with *After the Fall* and the 1980s with *The American Cloak*” (p. 76). Therefore, we can assume that understanding his mother is indispensable to understand his wife and mother characterizations.

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## 2. MILLER AND HIS WIVES

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### 2.1 Miller and Mary Grace Slattery

Arthur Miller divorced twice and had three wives successively. His first wife, Mary Grace Slattery, was a girl he had met at university. She was Catholic, the daughter of an Ohio insurance salesman, and was as idealistic, high-principled and emotionally inhibited as Miller himself. After their marriage, Mary gave up her own educational chance and supported Miller with her income regretlessly while he wrote all his early plays. Besides, she was equal in intellect with Miller, so she has been his creating stimulus in some degree. In *Timebends*, Miller recalls that he often read what he wrote to her and

listened to her suggestions. During their 16 matrimonial years, Miller wrote the most outstanding works among his canon such as *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. Accordingly, Maurice Zolotow (1960), the biographer of Marilyn Monroe, points out that Mary seems to have been almost ideally compatible to her husband's interests and temperament:

His wife: Mary Grace Slattery Miller, was political, literary, intense in the style of the 1930's, and she was an intellectual – it was she who was the family intellectual. She had been Miller's intellectual stimulus, his creative inspiration, his economic support. She had worked as a waitress and later as an editor at Harper & Brothers to support him while he established himself as a writer. (p. 265)

Miller speaks highly of his first wife, confessing that he mindlessly relies on her and he would never have done the early plays without her loyal, self-sacrificing, stimulating, loving support and actual cash-support. And in *Timebends*, he acclaims her as being strong, resolute and righteous.

However, after Miller fell in love with Marilyn Monroe, his marriage with Mary was deteriorating in 1954. Their mutual understanding and mutual confidence was broken. There was no evidence from Miller himself to account for the breakup of his marriage with Mary Grace Slattery. Other factors, however, might have had some bearing on their separation: the fact that Mary Slattery was Catholic and the children were raised as Zolotow reports, “without any sense of being half-Jewish” (ibid, p. 264), or the fact that Mary's relationship with Miller's mother was strained.

Though their sixteen-year marriage broke up, Mary Grace Slattery's influence can be found in many Miller's plays. Miller creates many strong-willed and upright wives based on Mary, such as Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible* and Louise in *After the Fall*.

## 2.2 Miller and Marilyn Monroe

Miller's second marriage was legendary and sensational. His second wife, Marilyn Monroe, was a very famous movie star and a sex symbol of America in the 1950s and the 1960s. Marilyn, with startling beauty and open sexuality, was actually a girlish woman. Marilyn was a woman who was encaged in her bitter childhood memory. She had been an illegitimate child, and did not know who her father was. And her mother had always been paranoid, an institutionalized schizophrenic who had tried to smother Marilyn in her crib as an infant. And Marilyn had ever been parked in an orphanage by her mother when her mother was institutionalized. The terror of being denied by her own mother and given to strangers left a shadow in her heart. When she grew up, she constantly looked for support, protection and reassurance from the elder. Hence, behind her winning big smile, she was a fragile and vulnerable golden girl.

Marilyn had an unhappy marriage with the famous

baseball player Joe DiMaggio. In 1950, she met with Miller for the first time. She immediately had a good feeling towards him, so did Miller. After a five-year hiatus, at a party of theatre people in May of 1955, Monroe and Miller met again and both of them came to realize that their mutual attraction was quite strong. They began to see each other secretly and regularly. Marilyn was so fond of Arthur Miller that she put Miller's framed picture on her bedroom wall and listed him as one of her favorite writers together with Tolstoy. In June 1956, Miller and Marilyn secretly married in New York, Miller is forty and Monroe is twenty-nine years old. After their marriage, Marilyn felt sheltered and protected for the first time in her whole life. They have been extremely happy to be together for some time. In a posthumously published interview made before her divorce from Miller, Marilyn had expressed her delighted feeling:

Gee, I love being married (to Arthur Miller)! All my life I've been alone. Now for the first time, the really first time, I feel I'm not alone any more. For the first time I have a feeling of being sheltered. It's as if I have come in out of the cold....There is a feeling of being together – a warmth and tenderness. I don't mean a display of affection or anything like that. I mean just being together. (as cited in Flanagna, 1969, p. 74)

But at the same time, in this interview, she had revealed unconsciously that her marriage to Miller was for her not a union of two stable adults but rather a relationship of a confused child-like woman and a man who represented security. Indeed, after their marriage, Miller gave more and more of his time to managing her business affair and less time to his work. And in Marilyn's heart, Miller acted as her absent father. During their marriage, Marilyn had always called Miller Papa. Their unequal status left a deep shadow in their marriage.

Marilyn was extremely fond of children and eager to be a mother, but misfortune always followed her pregnancy. During her short marriage to Miller, she suffered two miscarriages (one in 1956 September, and the other in 1958 December) and one ectopic pregnancy ending in abortion (in 1957 August). Every loss of child brought her big blows and prompted her more to seek for relief on sleeping pills. In order to comfort and cheer her dolorous wife who lost her child in 1957, as an act of love for his distraught wife, Miller set himself to writing a screenplay for her, and that is *The Misfits*. However, Miller's original intention was never fulfilled, and instead, his relationship with Marilyn broke up in the casting of *The Misfits*. After four-and-one-half tumultuous and emotionally turbulent years, they divorced in 1961 on the grounds of “incompatibility of character” (Flanagna, 1993, p. 40). And just one year after their divorce, Marilyn died in 1962, due to an overdose of sleeping pills.

Regarding his second wife, Miller always feels regret and sympathy, along with appreciation. During their marriage, he tried to comfort her fragile heart, and attempted to protect her from harm. In *Timebends*, he

narrates the part about Marilyn affectionately. Besides sympathy, he also admires her valor in taking life on unarmed, with no allies and no reservations, "I said that I thought there was a greatness of spirit in her, even a crazy kind of nobility that the right role might release" (1995, p. 450). In addition, Miller also appreciates her warmhearted nature and her quick-sympathy to others.

It is beyond doubt that Marilyn Monroe's appearance has brought about many changes to Arthur Miller. After his marriage with Monroe, Miller began to understand women more deeply, which extended to his attitudes towards his female figures in his writings. Marilyn's influence upon Miller lies in the fact that because of her, for the first time, he puts a woman in a center position in the screenplay *The Misfits* and in the play *After the Fall*. But, in Miller's writing previous to his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, despite its autobiographical tendency, the overriding concern is for the social implications and repercussions of a man's actions. In a word, Marilyn Monroe has a direct and pervading influence upon Miller's choice of subject matters and forms.

### 2.3 Miller and Ingeborg Morath

In sharp contrast to the tumult and sensation of his second marriage, Miller's third marriage is a quiet and harmonious one and lasts long. His third wife, Ingeborg Morath, was an Austrian-born professional photographer. Ingeborg Morath had been in the Nazi Concentration and experienced a narrow escape when she was a little girl. Just like Miller, she also suffered an unhappy marriage before their first meeting. Besides, as a photographer, she traveled widely. All these experiences made her rather tolerant, strong and very mature with no ties in every aspect. Miller has admitted that she was quite different from the women in his previous life, "she was neither optimist nor pessimist. She welcomed the good in people despite expecting the worst" (ibid, p. 505). So her appearance shined on Miller's dismay. They got married in 1962 and had been together for forty years since Ingeborg's death in 2002.

For Miller, Ingeborg was not only his wife and the mother to their daughter Rebecca, but also his life companion. Ingeborg was equally intelligent with Miller and had a genius for languages. She could also speak English, French, Spanish, and Italian fluently, and Rumanian with some residual difficulty. She had learned Russian before their trip began. And She, after two weeks in Greece, she could speak Greek, which she had never studied at all. She became Miller's wonderful help and travel companion, and Miller confessed, "I would gradually learn to turn to her in any foreign country for interpretation of what the local barbarians were trying to tell me, and it usually worked" (ibid, p. 569). And she accompanied Miller to Russia, China and other countries. Furthermore, Ingeborg was also an independent and strong woman. She devoted herself to her own career and made

very successfully. During their trips, Miller wrote down the travel journals while Ingeborg made photos of the trips. They were wonderful partners in work. Nearly all Miller's travel journals published were photographed by Ingeborg. For example, Miller's travel journals *In Russia* (1969), *In the Country* (1977), and *Chinese Encounters* (1979) were photographed by his wife Ingeborg. In addition to them, his book *Salesman in Beijing* (1984) was also photographed by his wife. Ingeborg also changes his husband's traditional view about women's roles in play. And after her appearance, a lot of strong women began to spring up in Miller's plays such as Holga in *After the Fall* and Leah Felt in *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*. By reviewing Miller's wives and his relationship with them, we find out that Miller admires all the virtues in his wives, which has become sources of his characterization of wife and mother characters in his plays.

### 3. MILLER AND THE OTHER WOMEN AROUND HIM

Arthur Miller is a very sensitive writer and is keen on observation. Aside from the influence from the women in his family life, Miller's authenticable creation of wife and mother figures owes a lot to the other women around him. In his autobiography, Miller presents a colorful gallery of wives and mothers he had encountered in his life.

Those wives and mothers showed up in *Timebends* can be generally divided into two categories: one is the domesticated housewife-mother; the other is the strong wife or mother. The former are almost mothers confined in domestic sphere with grownup children including Mrs. Julia Slattery, Annie Newman. Mrs. Julia Slattery, his first mother-in-law was an intelligent and sympathetic woman, but she wasted away under customs she was forced to obey. Annie Newman, Miller's uncle Manny Newman's wife, was a moving woman who bore the cross of reality for these dreamy men in her family. And she kept her calm, enthusiastic smile all the while in order to let her husband feel being appreciated. All the above domesticated housewife-mothers have contributed to Miller's presentation of housewife-mothers in the early plays. For instance, Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is actually based on the Newman's family, and in some degree, Annie Newman is the prototype of Linda Loman.

In *Timebends*, the strong wives and mothers account for a large percent. Miller writes about all his aunts with admiration. His eldest aunt, Minnie Barnett, courageously faced the harsh reality and valiantly supported her husband after he had lost his money in the Depression. Miller has commented that she was a wonderful woman. His second aunt, Betty Barnett, also showed her valor during the Depression. After the birth of her first child – a helpless mongoloid, she took up religion. Miller praises her as "a woman of seriousness and real quality" (ibid, p.



30). His youngest aunt, Stella Barnett, was a strong-willed woman, who Miller admires most. Stella was the wife of his uncle Hymie. Hymie died a year after their marriage, but Stella never married again all her life. Stella became a manicurist after Hymie's death to support herself. For Miller, Stella is important to him. As he exclaims, "how strange that this woman, with whom I could not have spent more than a few hours in my entire life, should be so important to me" (ibid, p. 35). More than that, Miller also admits,

I...saw quite simply that my style as a playwright had been influenced by Stella no less than by my mother, that somewhere down deep where the sources are a rule never if possible to let an uncultivated, vulgarly candid, worldly, loving bleached-blond woman walk out of one of my plays disappointed...(ibid)

Miller has infused the wonderful qualities of these strong wives and mothers into his presentation of wives and mothers in his plays. Therefore, almost in every Miller's play, there is a strong wife or mother such as Kate Keller in *All My Sons*, Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible* etc..

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## CONCLUSION

All the women in his life and his relationship with the women influence his vision about women, and make him

consider women's situation comprehensively. Based on the prototypes of his mother, his wives and other women around him, he creates many beautiful and vivid images of different wives and mothers. He reveals their tears, agonies, dreams, and happiness, most importantly, their strength. All in all, his life fed his art.

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