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REVIEW

Postmodern Culture's Impact on Arthur Miller's View of Humanity

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Leinster, Ciarán. *Postmodernism in Arthur Miller's Long-Late Period*. Leiden: Brill, 2025. x + 196 pages. Costerus New Series, Vol. 237. ISBN 978-90-04-69298-5. Hb. $114.

Ciarán Leinster's exquisite, broadly researched, and well-reasoned study is significant not only because of the attention it gives to Miller's often-neglected later plays, but primarily because of its wide-ranging analysis of postmodern culture, its elements, sources, and effect on the ways people conceive of the world and their place in it. Arthur Miller had an exceptionally long career. His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, was produced in November 1944. Miller had just turned twenty-nine years old. His last published play, *Finishing the Picture*, was released in September 2004, less than five months before his death at the age of eighty-nine. His best-known plays are from the late 1940s and early 1950s: *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and *A View from the Bridge*. Critics often treat Miller as if he never moved beyond the aesthetic approach and moral concerns of this period. But, as Leinster points out, more than two-thirds of Miller's career took place after this, in the last four decades of the twentieth century, the period that coincides with the emergence of postmodernist culture. "My contention," Leinster writes, "is that Miller was heavily influenced by postmodernist styles of thought and writing from the 1970s to the end of his career . . .. I do not assert that he surrendered entirely to a postmodernist viewpoint or aesthetic . . . but that much of what he wrote in these years is best understood through the lens of postmodernism" (3). Leinster shows how social changes in the late twentieth century influenced the settings of Miller's plays and his dramatic style. The question is how much these developments changed the central themes of his plays.

Leinster divides his book into five major sections. The first and longest is his analysis of the concept of postmodernism, where his discussion is most prominently influenced by ideas from Jean Baudrillard and Linda Hutcheon. This is followed by four chapters in which he situates individual Miller plays written after 1970 in the postmodern context. *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1977) concerns people who believe they are constantly

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on display and thus experience their lives as performances, which makes their actions difficult to interpret. *Some Kind of Love Story* (1982) and *Clara* (1987) are detective stories that question the adequacy of investigation to discover reality. *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991) depicts a duplicitous, amoral bigamist and his wives, who look back on their betrayal wondering how they failed to see through appearances. In *Resurrection Blues* (2002) all values are subsumed under commercial transactions as a dictator seeks to raise money by televising the crucifixion of a political opponent. Leinster's analysis here has a dialectical form: he uses the concept of postmodernism to interpret what Miller is doing in his later plays and then in his chapters on the plays uses their themes to expand and deepen his discussion of postmodernism.

"Paranoia is at the core of my conception of postmodernity . . . ," says Leinster. "I define it as not only being unsure as to whether something's nature is really as it appears, but lacking entirely any standard against which to objectively assess it" (21–22). In postmodernism, people became aware that "representations create rather than reflect reality," and so, unlike the earlier modernists, who asked us to consider truths that might conflict with accepted social mores, postmodernists no longer believe an independent objective reality exists and seek to reveal the "unseen forces" that manipulate representations of the real (26, 32). These cultural changes led to moral skepticism, which Leinster argues forced Miller to change the focus of his drama: "His plays became less about proving the validity of a certain perspective, and more about dramatising the reaction of a person or group of people to events" (51). Miller now found himself in "a moral gray area," whereas in the plays of the 1940s and 50s, he would have "found clear-cut blacks and whites" (51). People in postmodernist culture are frightened and confused by the world they encounter, doubtful about the soundness of their beliefs, and skeptical of the social guideposts that in the past would have helped them navigate. They drift rather than guide their lives. The rise of postmodernist culture, in Leinster's view, forced Miller to revise his conception of the human condition and with it the central themes of his plays.

But is this change in theme as pronounced as Leinster proposes? In his first Broadway production, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, Miller depicts characters who are overcome by accidents and other events they cannot foresee. They have a paranoid perspective on their lives, much like the one Leinster attributes to postmodernism. One character believes human lives are like those of jellyfish caught helplessly in the motion of the waters that

surround them. Their anxiety and confusion is similar to what Miller depicts in *The Archbishop's Ceiling*. Can this later play really be the "key turning point of Miller's career" as Leinster suggests (86)?

It also is not clear that Miller is trying to convey the "validity of a certain perspective" in his plays of the 1940s and 1950s. Rather, these plays depict characters caught in complicated moral situations, and Miller shows us the complexity of their debates about what should be done, rarely giving us a simple endorsement of one side or the other. In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller's life seems peaceful and his values aligned until a machine failure at his factory forces him to choose between protecting his family's financial well-being and gambling with pilots' lives in World War II. As a man who has spent his life building his business, Keller convinces himself that the gamble is worth taking and chooses to protect his family. His sons, who have fought in the war, condemn the gamble as outrageous and irresponsible. At the play's end, Joe kills himself, but it is clear that Miller does not intend this as a simple condemnation of Joe's decision. Joe's son Chris, whose moralistic rejection of his father has driven the suicide, flees from the house and tearfully begs for forgiveness: "Mother, I didn't mean to—" (Miller 158). Miller is asking his audience to deliberate about both sides in this debate and acknowledge the moral complexity of the situation.

Complexity and confusion in human experience are not things Miller discovered only in a later postmodern period of his writing. They are central to his writing from the beginning. Miller's theme in his early plays is not moralism: the endorsement of what he considers an objective set of predetermined values, like the Ten Commandments. Rather, his theme is the burden of autonomy. He places his characters in morally complex situations and depicts struggle, amid confusion and conflicting values, as they decide what to do. Miller never lets his central characters simply tell victim stories about themselves. As overwhelming as surrounding events may be, they must accept that they made free decisions in responding to those events, and they must take responsibility for their actions. Miller's central theme in these early plays is the burden and complexity of autonomy, not the championing of a particular moral vision. The burden of autonomy remains Miller's central theme throughout his career.

Certainly, *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* and *Resurrection Blues* show a new irony in Miller's tone, but this does not change his central theme of agency. The irony is introduced here by the fact that Miller is depicting characters who are unable to accept the burden of their autonomy and the responsibility it entails. They confuse lacking connection to people and

values with freedom. As a result, they are incapable of tragedy and are merely absurd. Miller is depicting here something similar to Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil," which she defines as "a curious, quite authentic inability to think" (159), an inability to accept the burden of seriously deliberating about actions, a burden that has been the central topic of all Miller's work.

This is a criticism of one theme in Leinster's book, but it also highlights the book's significance. *Postmodernism in Arthur Miller's Long-Late Period* is an outstanding study of Miller's later plays that uses these works to analyze broadly the concept of postmodernism. In doing this, it raises interesting questions about how we interpret all of Miller's plays, including our understanding of moral discourse in his early works. As a result, in addition to being an informative analysis of postmodernism, Leinster's discussion earns a place on the very short shelf of essential readings for anyone who wants to study Miller seriously.

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David Palmer taught philosophy at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (USA). His interest in ethics and theories of the self led him to examine tragedies as depictions of how a self goes into crisis. He edited *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama* and was president of the Arthur Miller Society, 2017–2022.

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