

Ethical Contours of the (Sub)urban Space-Time Relationship in the Early Postwar American Drama

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Abstract This paper analyzes the (sub)urban time-space relationship in the early postwar American drama. In so doing, special attention is given to how various dramatic forms give rise to different conceptions and experiences of (sub)urban time as it is manifested in dream and illusion and in memory and nostalgia. It also argues that the various dramatic canvasses on which time is materially embodied, in their totality, point to a multi-layered experience of time which in turn opens up, to different degrees, an ethical space of reading. In the immediate postwar American drama, we can observe an interesting relationship between dramatic form and time. Despite this interesting array of temporal conceptions, what is missing in all these plays is the acutely self-conscious sense of the theatricality of social life that is deeply embedded in the modern(ist) drama. The fundamentally conservative nature of the early post-war American drama and its general confidence in the representational validity of the realistic-naturalistic form reflects the overall socio-cultural confidence in the American conception of the post-war world and itself.

Keywords American suburbia; dramatic form; Miller; post-war American drama; Williams

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I. Introduction

“Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries!

blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible mad houses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!” — thus howled Allen Ginsberg in 1955, a full decade after the end of the Second World War that ushered in a new era in which America emerged as the superpower of the postwar world. *Howl* was an act of total moral-political aggression, as was much of the work of the Beats, which aimed at criticizing the sterility and conformity of American life, the meaninglessness of American politics, and the banality of popular culture. Moloch is a modern evil or even modernity itself, encompassing everything from “the economic system, urban-industrial milieu, government, police, war, atom bomb” to “everyone’s mentality, America and Time (as opposed to Eternity)” (Perkins 550). For the Beats, the sense of security and belonging that the middle-class (sub)urban life supposedly offers is nothing but an Ozzie-and-Harriet complacency, a temporary stasis waiting impatiently to degenerate into decay. Consequently, apartments are a site of dehumanizing and dehumanized urban settlement, suburban houses a site of dull monotonous life in an amorphous, homogenized and uniform collectivity. Instead, life’s meaning should be sought in constant movement, or “on the road,” as the exuberantly anarchic Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac’s famous 1951 novel shows. Moriarty would only drop in an apartment house for a day or two before he begins to feel suffocated and get ready ever to move on. He would pass by suburbs unnoticed and unnoticed because they are not only often literally invisible when viewed from interstate highways or even local roads, but more significantly because the suburban paranoia does not allow for the encroachment of beatniks like him into the life-world of American suburbia.

In the brief period between 1945 and 1949, four plays which have since been firmly inscribed in the canon of American drama graced the American stage. The year 1945 saw Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, both Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* and Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* saw the light in 1947 at either end of the year, and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* was premiered in 1949. More than sixty years after the premier of the last on the list, these four plays are among the most frequently staged and critically discussed of all American plays.

Arthur Miller’s plays dramatize the turbulent process of economic and cultural change that early postwar American society was undergoing, during which the countryside was giving way to suburbia and suburbia to the city and the myth-ideal of the American Dream was metamorphosing itself without ever descending into the realm of materiality. In the dramatic world of Tennessee Williams, however, suburbia is conspicuous for its absence as is the American Dream. His work, based on what Esther Merle Jackson calls the “synthetic myth” (67), derives from a region

of America which has been fraught with a self-conscious romantic mythology. As a Southerner trapped in between the rich yet almost pre-modern tradition of the “Southern agrarian” art of language and the mainstream of the American society with its overpowering modern-universal culture, Williams was a stranger at home. It is not for nothing that suburbia, which might have worked as the fender for those Southerners who had been going through such a drastic social and economic collapse, is almost completely missing in Williams’s plays. Also, the metaphysical anxiety of the ravage of time, only intimated in Miller’s work, is foregrounded in Williams’s. As he writes in his essay “The Catastrophe of Success,” “time is short and it doesn’t return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition” (1048).

Both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* have a suburban setting whereas Williams locates his two plays in the urban tenement. While Miller makes “invisible suburbs” visible, Williams humanizes “robot apartments.” Using these four plays as paradigmatic works, this paper analyzes the (sub)urban time-space relationship in the early postwar American drama. In so doing, special attention is given to how various dramatic forms Miller and Williams adopt for each of these plays give rise to different conceptions and experiences of (sub)urban time as it is manifested in dream and illusion and in memory and nostalgia. Furthermore, I argue, the four dramatic canvasses on which time is materially embodied point in their totality to a multi-layered experience of time which in turn opens up, to different degrees, an ethical space of reading. However, although these plays display an excitingly stratified picture in their conceptions of time and mirror and reflect the preoccupations and anxieties of the age just as their contemporaneous European counterpart often grouped together under the name of “the Theatre of the Absurd” do, they nonetheless exude certain artistic confidence and assuredness in their belief in the representational congruence and correspondence between art and the world as America, as the superpower, conceives and perceives the world and itself. Ultimately, this sense of post-war American empowerment puts artistic burden on the post-war American drama and is reflected in the relatively conservative nature of its formal experimentation and the ethical limits of its temporal conception.

II. Realism and the Un-Ethics of the Totality of Time: *All My Sons* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Three years after his initial failure to attract Broadway audiences with *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), Arthur Miller had another go at the postwar public

with a play that drew on memories of the war-time heroism and pivoted on the moral responsibility of those who remained in the safety net of their neatly groomed suburban homes. Inspired by the Truman Committee's investigation of a scandal involving the manufacture of faulty airplane parts in Ohio, *All My Sons* plays upon the old-themed yet powerful irony of moral war and immoral peace. The play centers on Joe Keller, an owner of a wartime manufacturing plant, who acquiesces in sending cracked airplane cylinders to the military — an act that results in the deaths of some twenty-one pilots — and then implicates his partner in the crime in order to slip through the dragnet of culpability.

Set in the suburban backyard of a middle-class family in a Norman Rockwell-like small town in Ohio, *All My Sons* shows the Kellers and their neighbors easily sliding back into the naïvely complacent domestic routine as wartime fear and memories gradually subside and future hopes and expectations set in. This recognizable domesticity is highlighted by the broad daylight under which the first act takes place. However, the very ordinariness of the setting and lighting makes “the deepening threat of the remainder more frightening” (Miller, *Timebends* 134), for Larry who has been missing in action for nearly four years has not yet fossilized into a mournful memorial in the mind of his mother, Kate. Kate's stubborn belief and/or hope that her son is still alive is eventually smashed by the letter Larry sent to Ann, his girlfriend, which confirms not only Larry's death but reveals an unbearable truth for everyone concerned: it was Larry's realization that Joe was responsible for the distribution of the cracked cylinders which forced Larry to commit suicide in a kamikaze flight. As the truth is finally revealed, the conscientious acknowledgement of the son is placed in stark contrast to the hypocritical denial of the father, the son's death to the father's living. The play culminates in Joe's suicide which seems the only option available for the irreparably dishonored man who finally admits his culpability and recognizes that “They were all my sons” (83).

Taking place in less than twenty-four hours, the entire action of the play pivots on the revelation of one single truth, that Keller is guilty of inculcating his partner for what he himself did. However, it turns out that the truth has been a secret hidden only from Keller's wife and younger son. In the initial stage directions, the Keller home is described as “*hedged ... by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere*” (5). A typical suburban home in which privacy and self-sufficiency are prime selling points, the Keller home nonetheless seems morally isolated for, as the play unfolds, the intimation translates into a revelation and we learn from Sue, a neighbor, that “Everybody knows Joe pulled a fast one

to get out of jail” and “There’s not a person on the block who doesn’t know the truth” (45). The Keller’s moral isolation, however, does not mirror their neighbors’ moral integrity. Joe is guilty, but the whole community is also morally tainted in its knowing silence.

Called “a classically well-made play” (Bigsby, *Critical Introduction* 172), *All My Sons* clearly exhibits what is called “Ibsen’s retrospective method” with its “device of the ‘fatal secret’” and “thematic forcing of past into present” (R. Williams 268). The past is a continuing presence, and the exposition renews itself at intervals, as each critical piece of information is revealed. Miller turned to Ibsen and *The Wild Duck* in particular not only because he felt strong affinity with Ibsen in their commitment to realism, but also because “dramatic characters, and the drama itself, can never hope to attain a maximum degree of consciousness unless they contain a viable unveiling of the contrast between past and present, and an awareness of the process by which the present has become what it is.” Miller adds on that “What is precious in the Ibsen method is its insistence upon valid causation” (“Ibsen” 227). In short, what Miller found inspiring in Ibsen is the latter’s strict adherence to the dramatic affirmation of clearly verifiable causational relations between past and present actions.

I don’t think we need to refer to Paul Ricoeur, for example, to recognize that the compartmentalization and reconstitution of our experience of time in terms of past, present and future is available only in the narrative form. That is, what Miller calls “the contrast between past and present” is made possible only in the context of storytelling. In realistic plays, dramatic time is articulated by the linearity and causality set between the actions of past and present and linking them in one continuous flow. What is often ignored or suppressed in “the process by which the present has become what it is” is the fact that there exist — as against the objective time if there is ever such a thing — often incommensurate pluralities of personal-subjective time with their differing modes of memory, illusion and dream as well as everyday life-experiences. What is called the denouement in drama is nothing more or less than the meeting point at which various subjective temporalities converge into a unified and homogeneous time. The prosaic language employed by Miller achieves its semantic effects too comfortably and it often tends to signify either truth or lie. As a result, it is blind to the need for (as well as being incapable of) articulating multiple realities that may lurk behind the ostensibly sensible façade, or more precisely backyard, of this mid-western suburban home.

What is at issue in *All My Sons* is clearly moral in nature: indeed, moral concerns such as lies, guilt, shame and responsibility are not just foregrounded

but omnipresent throughout the whole play. However, because it is framed in a single uninterrupted time flow, the play tends to show certain flatness in moral perspectives. By placing Joe Keller in a moral spectrum in which only a finite sense of dramatic progression is allowed, Miller keeps the flow of time in a linear continuum (rather than a circular or spiral one or a disjunctively polyphonic multi-directionality) where Keller's death is allegorized in an absolute and irreversible sense of the history's ending. The revelation of Keller's culpability functions as the centripetal force that draws into itself the actions as well as thoughts and desires of all the major characters: Kate's stubborn denial, Ann's fearful desire, George's filial anger, Chris's feigned idealism, the neighbors' complicitous quietism all melt into the air once Larry's letter to Ann is put on the table and Keller's subsequent suicide takes place within a couple of minutes. Everything tightly organized, there is little that does not make sense here, nothing is absurd, nothing is left to blind chances, and the vicissitudes of remembering and forgetting the past, let alone of living the present, can find no nest to dwell in. "Cling[ing] always to the marvelous spectacle of life forcing one event out of the jaws of the preceding one and to reveal its elemental consistencies with surprise" ("Ibsen" 228), Miller keeps on tightening the screw, as if to prove to the American public that it is the literati who set a definite precedent for William H. Whyte's "Organization Man." The relentless strive toward the resolution we witness in *All My Sons* ironically flattens our perspective toward the multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of the suburban life. It misses out those fluctuating and often amorphous pluralities of subjective time instead of giving them a proper shape, however unsure, precarious or fleeting that shape may seem. No undecidability, no indeterminacy, no ambiguity is allowed in the monolithic totality of the play's moral canvass that any possibility of ethical consideration is precluded from the beginning. When faced with such a forceful moral conviction as is found in the play, the reader is stripped of his or her ethical status. Either you decide to sing along the play's moral hymn or you take umbrage at its preachiness.

This poses an intractable problem for Miller in that *All My Sons*, in Bigsby's words, "implies a critique of society and yet in effect identifies no way in which that society can be transformed" (*Critical Introduction* 171). To place Bigsby's criticism in the context of my argument, when American society is conceived as a single-layered homogeneous reality, its criticism can only aim at a total transformation of it. When Miller presses home a judgment, it has to be a total one. This totalizing tendency in Miller's social criticism is closely connected to the utopian impulse which has always striven for the realization of complete homogenization and unity, whether on the socio-economic or personal-cultural plane, or both. Thus, when the

convergence of different personal times is enforced by the linearity of an artful and artificial narrative, as by the suicide of Keller in the case of *All My Sons*, the end result is the utopian (or dystopian) reduction of multiple personal times to a single historical time and the historical time to natural time, the latter either erasing the present or infinitizing it. Whether it is viewed as utopian or dystopian is external to the narrative, or more to the point, the dramatic action itself. Utopia is a society whose temporal category is naturalized and whose spatial category essentialized.

Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* seems at first to exhibit the same linear temporal totality we have witnessed in Miller's *All My Sons*, this time centering on the tragic heroine named Blanche DuBois. However, when combined with the narrative with an ambiguously open ending, the poetic language floating over the prosaic naturalistic setting points to a different kind of the totality of time. Blended into this temporal totality are four heterogeneous elements: historical, theatrical, personal and natural. The ingenious unity in heterogeneity is then artificially and artfully pushed into high relief by the insistent presence of desire, a desire for magic, that is, a desire to stand outside time. Time is no more the Other, a body-snatching stranger: Time is the Self that peregrinates Life which offers itself up to it. As we can see from the epigraphic line from Blanche, it is the magical "kindness of strangers" that is pitted against the all-consuming ravage of time.

Premiered in December 1947 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway, *A Streetcar Named Desire* enacts the story of a faded Southern belle, Blanche DuBois, who, living with illusions of past elegances, comes to visit her sister, Stella, and brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski in their shabby apartment in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The visit becomes more permanent when it is revealed that Blanche lost the family home and has no money or job. Tensions between Stanley and Blanche mount, but Stella, who is pregnant and expecting to deliver any day, loves them both and tries to keep peace. Blanche starts dating Stanley's lonely, kindly coworker Harold "Mitch" Mitchell, but Stanley breaks up the relationship when he tells Mitch about what he has found out about Blanche's past: she was no better than a whore back in her hometown and was fired from her teaching job for trying to seduce one of her students. As Stella goes to the hospital to have the baby, the rivalry between Stanley and Blanche reaches its climax when he rapes her. Blanche suffers a nervous breakdown and is sent to an asylum. To the doctor who comes for her, she remarks, "Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (563).

Apart from the ironic symbolism of the street name, the opening stage directions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* are essentially functional, having little of a

poetic delicacy and inventiveness that those of *Death of a Salesman*, for example, exude:

The exterior of a two-story corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L&N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. The building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both. (469)

The “raffish charm” that this poor urban neighborhood possesses comes from its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population, getting along well with one another and apparently without the racial tensions that have plagued practically everywhere in America. Into this arrives a Southern belle who, having lost her plantation home in Laurel, Mississippi, has come to live with her sister. Even when the lies of the old South are no longer able to sustain the individual in a world whose pragmatics have no place for the fragile spirit, Blanche keeps attempting, in vain, to protect that fragile spirit of hers while seeing through the need for survival. Her first conversation with her sister on the latter’s boorish Polish-American husband is indicative of this: “He’s just not the sort that goes for jasmine perfume! But maybe he’s what we need to mix with our blood now that we’ve lost Belle Reve and have to go on without Belle Reve to protect us” (492). When the paradise of the Old South is lost, no buffer zone is spared and ready to save a Southern belle like Blanche from falling into disgrace. The absence of suburbia as one such buffer zone maximizes the dramatic force of Williams’s plays of the South.

The detailed stage directions, also prosaic, given at the first appearance of Blanche on the stage intimate that she is an outsider drifted into an alien environment which will eventually destroy her already fragile self:

Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. She is about five years older than Stella. Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth. (471)

Probably the most famous use of moth as literary symbol can be found in Virginia Woolf's essay, "The Death of the Moth." In it, Woolf endows the all too brief life of the moth with a strange mixture of doomed desperation and serene dignity which would perfectly capture the life and character of Blanche. Just as the moth, calm and serene in the dark, expends its life-force by flapping its wings hard around the light, so Blanche loses her fragile hold on life when the light reveals her aged, worn-out face and strips her of those magical touches that draw people like Mitch near her:

MITCH: Let's turn the light on here.

BLANCHE (*fearfully*): Light? Which light? What for?

MITCH: This one with the paper thing on it. (*He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She utters a frightened gasp.*)

BLANCHE: What did you do that for?

MITCH: So I can take a look at you good and plain!

BLANCHE: Of course you don't really mean to be insulting!

MITCH: No, just realistic.

BLANCHE: I don't want realism.

MITCH: Naw, I guess not.

BLANCHE: I'll tell you what I want. Magic! (*Mitch laughs*) Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!
— *Don't turn the light on!* (544-45)

It is the genius of Williams that he sets up the realism/reality that Blanche so detests at four different levels of time - historical, theatrical, personal and natural — and is still able to alchemize them into one powerful yet coherent symbol: the old mythology of the South has historically died out; realism is a theatrical convention that has outstayed its welcome; Blanche has lost her innocence and purity through her abandonment of her young homosexual husband, her immoral conduct with one of her students, and her prostitution; adding to all these is the ravage of time that nature brings upon her. In Williams's plays, and especially in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, these different temporalities coalesce into the "timeless world of a play." When Blanche mumbles her last words before fading away to an asylum, she is urging us to remember her out of time, in the timeless world: "Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

Blanche's tragic journey from Cemeteries to the Elysian Fields on a streetcar

named *Desire* is not necessarily ironic. However contrasted in their symbolic meanings, both *Cemeteries* and the *Elysian Fields* are just signifiers emptied of their signified, and New Orleans is as deadly as Laurel, Mississippi. The final death-blow dealt to Blanche by Stanley's rape forces her to finally give up on her defiant struggle against the schism or schizophrenic suffering between her aging and tainted body of realism and her relentless yet fragile spirit dwelling in the time-suspending world of magic. Whether she has completely lost her mind as she is taken to a psychiatric ward is a moot point. If she indeed has, her hypocritical pretense in the "real" world will give way to the ritual of pure fantasy freed from everyday banality. An existential need to create an illusion in which time is arrested will vanish as her everyday ritual in the ward will not be touched by the vicissitudes of changing life situations. Also her everyday ritual of living a magical life and telling about it will lose its suffocating subjectivity not only because everybody in the ward is a stranger to each other but also because she is not an agent of time in its heterogeneous totality anymore. Ultimately, Blanche DuBois's magical existence stands outside time and becomes eternalized, for she exists only in the eyes and mind of the penultimate stranger, the audience-reader.

All My Sons and *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be seen as two American plays that are classic examples of "Ibsen's false tragedy" (Abel 180), for, in both of them, we find "the new realistic vision of life" and "the necessitarian structure of fated events" (Abel 178) tightly yet uncomfortably etched against the poetic impulse to break up the linear continuity of finite time. Herein lies in the fundamental limit of realistic-naturalistic drama: the realistic-naturalistic drama leaves too little and too much for the audience-reader. It closes down, with its forced-on identification process, any possibility of opening up an ethical space in which the audience-reader weighs different options and choices (s)he draws out of fundamentally non-ethical situations created in the theatrical space. At the same time, however, it leaves too much for the audience-reader in the sense that the reception of its dramatic meaning is absolutely contingent upon its representational responsiveness to the audience-reader's lived experiences. In order to escape from this conundrum of the dramatic either-or/do-or-die, memory, that temporally ambiguous property created in the present out of the past, is not just to be expounded or intimated as in *All My Sons* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*: it needs to be spatialized and seen in and alongside the always already present dramatic space.

III. Memory Play and the Ethics of Temporal Heterogeneity: *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman*

Often regarded as postwar American theatre's "signature play" (Krasner 29), *The Glass Menagerie* initially opened in Chicago at the Civic Theatre in December 1944. Poorly attended, the play was saved from falling into oblivion by critics and moved to Broadway the next year where its immediate success launched the career of one of the most brilliant playwrights in the history of American theatre. The play is firmly rooted in the playwright's own life and is thus autobiographical, with the narrator, Tom Wingfield (Who shares the same first name with Williams), as a "likely stand-in for the author himself" (Krasner 31). It is set in the year of 1936 and is therefore sprinkled here and there with nostalgic reminders of the Depression era, evoked most atmospherically by musical means. In fact, memory for Williams is so fragile, so ephemeral and impermanent that it tends to escape the concrete confinement of visual images and language that conventional drama offers. As Tom says at the beginning of the play, "In memory everything seems to happen to music" (400).

According to the opening stage directions of *The Glass Menagerie*,

The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism. (399)

Williams's description of the Wingfields' shoddy St. Louis tenement as "one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular-units" that operate as "one interfused mass of automatism" sounds exactly like a prosaic version of Ginsberg's poetic diction. The playwright infuses this "robot apartment" with such delicate poetry that the whole play indeed feels like Laura's glass unicorn. In the play, Tom is acutely aware of the gap between what he remembers now and what happened then. Furthermore, he realizes, as we do, that we can go back to a place again but we can't go back in time. The distance between the past and present, unlike that between different places, cannot be traversed: thus, "I didn't go to the moon, I went much further — for time is the longest distance between two places" (464). The closest thing we can do to traveling in time is to recollect bits and pieces of our memory of the past and tell a story, and tell it to others. Thus, Tom assumes a dual role of narrator and character — one in the present and the other in the past — switching back and forth between them.

Williams sets up this “metatheatrical” device so he can create an illusion of “arresting time” which is, for him, the essence of all arts. In “The Timeless World of a Play” which he originally published in the *New York Times*, Williams writes:

It is this continual rush of time, so violent that it appears to be screaming, that deprives our actual lives of so much dignity and meaning, and it is, perhaps more than anything else, the *arrest of time* which has taken place in a complete work of art that gives to certain plays their feeling of depth and significance. (647)

In his production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams elaborates on realism’s incapability of dramatizing memory. He chooses the occasion to reject the “straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks.” Everyone, he maintains, “should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art” because “truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which merely present in appearance” (395). Also, being a memory play, *The Glass Menagerie* consists of (seven) scenes instead of usual acts because memory is necessarily “fragmentary rather than architectural” (396).

Looking back, Tom Wingfield recalls his life during the Depression with his mother, Amanda, who lives in dreams of a probably imaginary past, and his crippled sister, Laura, who seems to live only for a collection of glass animals. At Amanda’s insistence, Tom invites his friend Jim from the warehouse where he works to the Wingfield apartment for dinner. It turns out Jim went to high school with Laura, who has long been quietly in love with his memory, and the two hit it off quite well until Jim mentions that he is engaged to be married. After Jim has gone, Amanda scolds Tom, who runs off to join the merchant marine.

Although there is a social dimension in the problems that inflict Amanda and Laura - Amanda’s husband left her a long time ago, a “telephone man who — fell in love with long distance!” (442) and the subsequent heavy-handedness with which she handles her daughter makes Laura shy away from the outer world further — they are, at a more fundamental level, victims of nature: Amanda tries desperately to protect herself from the ravage of time by wrapping herself with a private mythology of once being a Southern belle who attracted hundreds of gentleman callers; Laura, being a cripple, withdraws herself into the inanimate world of a glass menagerie. Stuck in this family, Tom has to make a painful choice: staying

with them, he will never have a chance to fulfill his dream as a poet; leaving them, he will never be able to free himself from feeling bitter remorse. Williams tells in his production notes that “nostalgia” is “the first condition of the play” (397). If so, nostalgia is an object of both evocation and suffocation. The voice that narrates *The Glass Menagerie* is not a confident one, for Tom is “as lost in the supposed present as he had been in the recalled past” (Biggsby, *Critical Introduction* 47-48). The combination of past regrets and present losses in Tom’s character binds him firmly with Amanda and Laura, a group of individuals who are left helpless “behind the rush of history” (Biggsby, *Critical Introduction* 46). Williams’s memory play is then a search for the ways of retrieving those individuals who are displaced and obliterated in history and remembering them “outside of time” (Williams, “Timeless World” 647).

The Glass Menagerie, as memory play, offers a different conception of time from that we find in the realistic-naturalistic drama of *All My Sons* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* in that instead of the teleological progression of time from the past to the present toward the future of dramatic finality, a radical break-up of time is foregrounded by allocating the present to narration and the past to action. Furthermore, this break-up of time draws on the distinction that Martin Puchner finds in classical Greek drama between Platonic diegesis and Aristotelian mimesis. That is, in *The Glass Menagerie*, the present is a diegetic temporality in which “the indirect, descriptive or narrative representation of objects, persons, spaces, and events through language” takes place whereas the past is a mimetic one in which the direct representation of such objects, persons, speeches, spaces, and events on a stage” happens (Puchner 24). In the opening narration, Tom Wingfield tells us that “I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (400). However, this radical separation and opposition between the truthful narrator and the illusory actor does not hold true because Tom Wingfield is a character who is both the diegetic narrator and the mimetic actor, moving between the past and the present freely with no constraint upon him. Furthermore, since he is played by one and the same actor and not played by two actors as, for example, in the case of Garr O’Donnell in Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Tom in the present cannot see himself in the past and thus remember himself in the past. The epistemological status of Tom’s narration is severely contested by his own involvement in the mimetic action on the stage. Therefore, an essential problem with memory play as Williams envisions it in *The Glass Menagerie* is that it contains a disturbing sense of easiness in compartmentalizing and differentiating the past from the present

at the same time the distinction between the past and the present is eroded by the diegetic and mimetic confusion. However much its fragility and fleetingness may have been stressed, the narrator's memory as dramatized onstage has little intimation or connection to his present status as narrator, and vice versa. His epistemological status (his looking back on the past) has no connection whatsoever with his ontological status (his present act of narrating). Furthermore, *The Glass Menagerie* exhibits little of the difficulties involving our ability to distinguish between illusion and reality. Tom is split into the truth-teller in the present and the stage magician in the past, with the truth-teller-narrator belonging to the present with a sure grip of reality, on the one hand, and with the stage magician-actor belonging to the past full of illusions.

In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller's guilt lies in his mendacity: he has lived by his lies and has no illusion about them. As a matter of fact, Keller even feels morally justified in his dishonorable acts as they are in the nature of business, in idealistic wartime or in pragmatic peacetime: "Who worked for nothin' in that war? When they work for nothin', I'll work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go!" (82). Money and success, of course, are also a central concern in Miller's next play, *Death of a Salesman*. Universally acclaimed as a "suburban tragedy" (Styan 143), the play immediately struck a deep chord with American audiences, and within a year of its premier, the play was performing in every major city in America. The American Dream Willy Loman pursues so desperately and the American values he tries so hard to hang onto have been perceived by the American public as the postwar resuscitation of American cultural poetics that is directly linked to the myth of the American Dream as propounded by the Founding Fathers. Matthew C. Roudane aptly captures the stature of Miller's play when he writes that "In an era when many scholars question precisely what constitutes American essentialism, most theatregoers still regard *Death of a Salesman* as the quintessential American play" (62-3).

"Years of Hope. Days of Rage," the subtitle of a standard history book on the 60s' America by Todd Gitlin, may well have been chosen for the epitaph on Willy Loman's tomb. Willy is a salesman who constantly defers his hope for the future and eventually devolves his deferred hope upon his failed sons. Realizing that "After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (98), Willy drives his car to death, hoping that the \$20,000 insurance policy will give his boys another chance to start afresh. At his

funeral a neighbor gives a sadly truthful account of Willy as “a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back — that’s an earthquake” (138). Linda, Willy’s long-suffering widow, informing her dead husband that the mortgage has finally been paid, can only sob, “We’re free and clear ... We’re free” (139).

In his distinguished introduction to his *Collected Plays* of 1958, Miller gives a fascinating account of his different approaches to *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*:

The first image that occurred to me which was to result in *Death of a Salesman* was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man’s head. In fact, *The Inside of His Head* was the first title. It was conceived half in laughter, for the inside of his head was a mass of contradictions. The image was in direct opposition to the method of *All My Sons* — a method one might call linear or eventual in that one fact or incident creates the necessity for the next. *The Salesman* image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes “next” but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be “brought forward” in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to. (155-56)

Still resting squarely on the dogged American pursuit of realism, *Death of a Salesman* is nevertheless a product of the playwright’s assiduous experimentation with dramatic form and language, resulting from his radical re-conception of the time-space relationship. Furthermore, what is perhaps most striking (in contrast to his previous play) is the dramatization of the interiority of the central character and of the temporal chasm that exists between the interior mind and the exterior action in the same dramatic space. Instead of imposing a strict causality on the sequence of events, as he did in *All My Sons*, Miller now uses the dramatic space to the effect that not only do the past and the present coexist and flow into each other seamlessly but, more ingenuously, different forms of remembering and reconstituting the past are enacted in the way they are registered in our consciousness. Therefore, Miller introduces a novel temporal structure which, far from being kept in a linear continuum, takes a circular form moving from the present to the real and false memories of the past and further to the downright dreams, fantasies and illusions

of uncertain points in time, and then back to the present. As Miller writes, “If I had wanted, then, to put the audience reaction into words, it would not have been ‘What happens next and why?’ so much as ‘Oh, God, of course!’” (“Introduction” 157).

Interestingly, a principal factor that triggered the change in Miller’s dramatic conception was Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* which Elia Kazan (who directed the first performances of all but one play under consideration here, the exception being *The Glass Menagerie*) took him to see. Equally interesting is the fact that when Williams was elaborating on the possibility of “a complete work of art” in which “the arrest of time” has consummately materialized, he referred to *Death of a Salesman* as the supreme example. Miller was “struck by the language, poetic, full-throated. It came as a revelation ... and seemed to validate his own desire to charge daily life with tragic significance, to use language as something more than an agent of character or plot” (Biggsby, *Arthur Miller* 98). Indeed, the influence the poetic realism of Williams’s language and his expressionistic set and setting have on *Death of a Salesman* can be easily recognized in Miller’s own wonderfully multivalent set and setting as described in the famous opening stage directions:

A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises.

Before us is the Salesman’s house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming house. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at the center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens onto the apartment house at the side.

Behind the kitchen, on a level raised six and a half feet, is the boys’ bedroom, at present barely visible. Two beds are dimly seen, and at the back of the room a dormer window. (This bedroom is above the unseen living-room.) At the left a stairway curves up to it from the kitchen.

The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent.

The roof-line of the house is one-dimensional; under and over it we see the apartment buildings. Before the house lies an apron, curving beyond the forestage into the orchestra. This forward area serves as the back yard as well as the locale of all Willy's imaginings and of his city scenes. Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping "through" a wall onto the forestage. (11-2)

As if to show the ultimate limits of language to capture the essence of atmosphere and mood, kinesic devices such as music and lighting take on a central role. It is not the words or bodily movement, not even the physical presence of the set that first greets and impresses the audience. Before the curtain rises, a melody of the flute drifts in out of darkness, an instrument best suited to express evanescence and ephemera. The flute is gradually replaced by its visual counterpart in the salesman's skeletal and semi-transparent house on which is fallen "the blue light of the sky." The surrounding urban architecture from which emanates "an angry glow of orange" first takes on "towering, angular shapes" and then reveals itself more concretely as "a solid vault of apartment houses," a vault symbolizing the confinement and domination the salesman's dwindling social and moral status is to suffer. The pastoral suburbia seems trapped in the jungle of urban settlements. However, the modern subjection and subjugation of everything that is solid to fluid liquidity is an all-encompassing reality. Nostalgia for the non-existent or falsified past in the guise of dreaming ahead seems the only available means with which to resist or protect oneself from the harsh reality, so "*An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality.*"

The bare-bone structure of the salesman's house also helps facilitate its transmutation into cityscapes such as Howard's office, Charley's office, a hotel in Boston as well as his own half-remembered, half-imagined suburban landscape of those good old days. In a play in which memory plays a central role, the imaginary walls make it possible for the characters to move in and out of different temporal zones with little of seeming awkwardness and much of liquid fluidity so as to embody the directionless stream of consciousness: "Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping 'through' a wall onto the forestage." Miller's dramaturgy makes for temporal fluidity as well as spatial

one, and in it thematic, spatial and temporal concerns are all merged into forming an excitingly novel and yet coherent picture. According to Bigsby, therefore, “the environment — the trees and open spaces of the real or remembered past, the oppressive constrictions of an urban environment — is a principal character in the play and a primary achievement of Miller, his director Elia Kazan, and his designer Jo Mielziner” (*Critical Introduction* 182).

Beneath the seeming calm of the 1950s lay radical changes in the American population that would have profound effects on all aspects of society. Between 1945 and 1960 the general population increased by 40.1 million to 180 million or by nearly 29 percent. The overwhelming majority of this increase was in the suburbs, where 11 million new houses were built between 1948-58 (out of 13 million overall). The large middle class that had lived in New York and other urban centers, the societal segment that had anchored the residential neighborhoods and fueled urban mercantilism, began moving out to the suburbs as the postwar economic boom bestowed its benefits upon them. Willy’s failure to join in this massive emigration to the flatlands of the American suburb — where “daily life was delivered from the cramp of the city, lifted out to the half-wide, half-open spaces, where the long-sought and long-feared American wilderness could be trimmed back and made habitable” (Gitlin 14) — is betrayed, at the beginning of the play, by his angry denial of the reality of social change that is pressing on around him and his family:

WILLY: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks.

LINDA: We should’ve bought the land next door.

WILLY: The street is lined with cars. There’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don’t grow any more, you can’t raise a carrot in the back yard. They should’ve had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?

LINDA: Yeah, like being a million miles from the city.

WILLY: They should’ve arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighborhood. *Lost*: More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room!

Linda: Well, after all, people had to move somewhere.

WILLY: No, there’s more people now.

LINDA: I don't think there's more people. I Think —

WILLY: There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink from that apartment house! (17-18)

We can easily sense in the mind of Willy a powerful yet frustrating sense of nostalgia which arises from the irreparable gap between longing and belonging: he longs for the beautified past but belongs in the brute present. As Svetlana Boym points out, “nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.” The nostalgic,” such as Willy, “desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (xv). The metaphysical anxiety for the rush of time that Boym talks about is perhaps a theme more appropriate for Tennessee Williams. Still, *Death of a Salesman* is a play about and of nostalgia since nostalgia “charts space on time and time on space” (Boym xviii). The tragedy for Willy is that neither his longing for the past nor his belonging in the present has a modicum of self-assurance, let alone cultural collectivity. When he recalls the time of two elm trees and lilac, wisteria, peonies and daffodils, he is definitely falsifying his memories, for the America of Willy and Biff on the swing was hard-hit by the Great Depression and its devastating effects on every walk of life. Willy's present is a space of nowhere, only a series of increasingly exhausting movements on the road. Once again, according to Boym, “Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways” (xiv). The only nostalgic sideways available for Willy is his transvaluation of the American Dream in terms of his death, or how much his death is worth.

As Joe Keller shoots himself to death in *All My Sons*, so Willy Loman takes his own life by speeding away. However, unlike Keller who kills himself in atonement for his misdeeds, Willy sees his death as an extension and best available realization of his pursuit of the American Dream. As the worth of one's life is evaluated in monetary terms in this soon to be called “Affluent Society,” so is that of one's death. In their final confrontation, Biff snaps at Willy, “Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!” (132). The salesman's tragedy is that being compelled to prove otherwise, he has no other way to do it except by bequeathing his son the insurance money (\$20,000) that will be collected after his death. Willy's memories of the pastoral suburb that his family once lived in are not sanitized or

romanticized ones, and cutting into his dreamy consciousness is the irrevocable sense of guilt for his negligence and immoral conduct as father and husband and for his incompetence as salesman. However, it is not the guilt that drives him, as it does Keller, to death. The present is not a consequence of the past in *Death of a Salesman*. The present and the past coexist in Willy's consciousness, albeit in incongruous juxtaposition. The memories evoked do not freeze him in time - past or present - because both the American Dream that propels him and the memories that arrest him are all, in the end, out of his reach and in an ever-deferred hope for the future. The authenticity of his memories is always in question, his dreams, fantasies, illusions or wishful thinking not rooted in any concrete time zone. Willy Loman chooses death less out of his guilt or disappointment and more in hope and expectation, however pathetic or delusive that may seem. When he bids farewell to his "only friend" Charley with these words - "After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (98) - he is not just being self-deprecatingly rhetorical: he is always already looking ahead, without going anywhere. The past, present and future in Willy's disintegrating mind is all interchangeable, whether these different time zones are embodied in dreams, memories or fantasies and illusions.

IV. Conclusion

In the immediate postwar American drama, we can observe an interesting relationship between dramatic form and time: the monolithic totality of time in *All My Sons*; the artful and artificial unity of heterogeneous time(s) in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; a radical disjunction of the past and present in *The Glass Menagerie*; the simultaneity of different modes of time in *Death of a Salesman*. Despite this interesting array of temporal conceptions, what is missing in all these plays is the acutely self-conscious sense of the theatricality of social life that is deeply embedded in the modernist drama under the rubric of the "theatre of the absurd" or "metatheatre." "In the Theatre of the Absurd," Martin Esslin argues, "the audience is confronted with actions that lack apparent motivation, characters that are in constant flux, and often happenings that are clearly outside the realm of rational experience" (416). It is precisely the ambiguity, undecidability and indeterminacy of our lived experiences that are found wanting in the post-war American drama. When moral concerns are foregrounded, especially in Miller's plays, when right and wrong are already determined within the dramatic action and characterization, the reader-audience becomes a passive receptacle of moral messages through the identification process. However, a genuine ethical practice of

reading can be exercised when one is confronted with fundamentally non-ethical situations, when possibilities rise from and out of making difficult ethical choices between right and right and of knowing when to delay or reserve moral judgment.

The fundamentally conservative nature of the early post-war American drama and its general confidence in the representational validity of the realistic-naturalistic form reflects the overall socio-cultural confidence in the American conception of the post-war world and itself. Despite or because of the absence of a rich native dramatic tradition, the postwar American drama generally offers less challenging ethical perspectives which tend to narrow down ethical possibilities instead of opening them up. The utopian totality of Miller's social world and the poetic individuality of Williams's private world are, in the end, two sides of the same coin which is American theater's naive confidence in the theater's representational power and validity. There is little we find in them of "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Kermode 177) which modernist writers have tried hard to control, order, give a shape and significance to.¹ Instead, what we see is the representability, warts and all, of modern society in its totality, or what Lehmann calls "the ideal of surveyability" (40). Nonetheless, As Williams has argued, reading drama is an ethical experience in the sense that we would sit and listen to what a Willy Loman or a Blanche DuBois in real life has to say only if we were not inflicted with the rush of time. The very fact that we read and watch Laura Wingfield or Joe Keller in books and on the stage testifies to "the timeless world of a play."

Note

1. The quotes are originally from T. S. Eliot's appreciative estimation of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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