ISSN: 2582-5526 www.thevoiceofcreativeresearch.com

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n3.38

Vaudeville of Despair: Memory, Myth, and the Fractured American Dream in Arthur Miller's *The American Clock*

Shaishav Mohan
(Research Scholar),
Shri Venkateshwara University, Gajraula,
Distt. Amroha, U.P., India

Dr. Uma Mishra
Associate Professor,
School of Humanities & Social Sciences,
Shri Venkateshwara University, Gajraula,
Distt. Amroha, U.P., India

Dr. Gajendra Dutt Sharma
Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Bareilly College, M.J.P. Rohilkhand University,
Bareilly, U.P., India

Abstract

This research paper provides a critical analysis of Arthur Miller's *The American Clock*, a play that dramatises the societal and psychological upheaval of the Great Depression. The paper argues that Miller deliberately eschews a traditional linear narrative in favour of a fragmented, kaleidoscopic structure, which he termed as a "vaudeville", to mirror the chaos of the era. By blending an epic, historical mural of a nation in crisis with a deeply personal, autobiographical narrative centered on the Baum family, the play explores the collapse of the American Dream. It examines how the loss of economic certainty leads to a profound crisis of identity for individuals and the nation. Drawing heavily on the critical analysis of Christopher Bigsby, this paper investigates the play's key themes: the interplay between public history and private memory, the fragility of social order, and the enduring relevance of the Depression as a foundational trauma in the American psyche. The analysis concludes that *The American Clock*

is not merely a historical piece but a timeless warning about the tenuous nature of prosperity and the moral questions that arise when "the clock stops." The research paper employs the qualitative method in order to explore the psychological and societal upheaval of the Great Depression in the concerned play.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, The American Clock, Great Depression, Memory Play, American Dream, Political Theatre

Introduction

Arthur Miller's career is defined by his relentless examination of the American conscience, particularly the friction between individual morality and societal pressure. Whereas plays like *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* have become canonical explorations of the American Dream and political hysteria, *The American Clock* (1980) remains one of his most ambitious and structurally daring works. Conceived in the 1970s and premiering in the early Reagan years, the play is a sweeping, panoramic look at the Great Depression of the 1930s. Miller, who came of age during this period, subtitled the play "A Vaudeville," signalling a departure from realist drama. He constructs a narrative that is less a plot-driven story and more a dynamic mosaic of scenes, songs, and personal recollections, creating a theatrical experience that is both epic in scope and deeply intimate in its focus.

This paper argues that *The American Clock* functions as both a historical mural and a personal vaudeville, utilising its fragmented, non-linear structure to dissect the collapse of American foundational myths during the Depression, and explores its enduring psychological impact. The play juxtaposes the public spectacle of national collapse—bankrupt financiers, striking workers, and dispossessed farmers—with the private tragedy of the Baum family, a thinly veiled portrait of Miller's own. Through this dual lens, Miller investigates how the sudden erasure of economic security dismantles personal identity, strains familial bonds, and forces a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between the individual and society. Analysing the play through the critical framework provided by Christopher Bigsby (2005) and other scholars, this paper explores its unique form, its autobiographical core, and its function as a persistent warning that the forces of history can, at any moment, bring the nation's progress to a halt.

The Historical Mural: Staging a Nation's Collapse

Unlike a traditional drama centered on a single protagonist's journey, *The American Clock* presents a broad tapestry of American life. Miller's intention was to create what Bigsby (2005) describes as a "mural of American society" (p. 348), a form that captures the multiplicity of experiences during the Depression. The play's structure is a "bricolage, a mosaic, a series of disparate actions whose connections are no less real for being unvoiced" (Bigsby, p. 343). Miller leaps between a Wall Street speakeasy where ruined investors contemplate suicide, a

Midwestern farm auction where farmers unite in revolt, and a relief office where the wealthy and the poor are suddenly equals in their desperation. This episodic method, reminiscent of the techniques of epic theatre, prevents the audience from becoming solely invested in one family's plight and instead forces them to confront the systemic nature of the crisis.

The Depression, as Miller presents it, was more than an economic event; it was a psychological one that forced the emergence of a new national consciousness. Before the crash, the prevailing American ethos was one of radical individualism. As Miller noted in an interview with Studs Terkel, "The average American could live and die without getting next to a government form. … He had no personal connection with the government, so that he could deduce 'society' had the slightest effect on him" (as cited in Bigsby, p. 337). The collapse shattered this illusion of immunity. The consequence was a "new sense of interdependence as those previously separated by space, class, race, found themselves confronted by forces not susceptible to American nostrums to do with individual destiny" (Bigsby, p. 338). The play visually and thematically reinforces this interdependence by having actors double and treble roles, blurring the lines between characters and backgrounds and suggesting a shared destiny. In doing so, Miller posits that the Depression, for all its devastation, was the moment America was forced to reckon with itself as a collective society rather than a mere collection of individuals.

The Personal Vaudeville: Autobiography and Memory

While the play's scope is epic, its emotional core is deeply personal and autobiographical. The Baum family—Moe, Rose, and their son Lee—is a direct reflection of Miller's own family, and their story provides the narrative thread that stitches the historical mural together. Lee, the narrator and a version of Miller himself, frames the events through the subjective and often fallible lens of memory. Bigsby emphasizes that the play is "Miller's personal odyssey in time as he travels back to his youth, pulling into some kind of shape events that had once seemed merely contingent" (p. 342).

The details of the Baum family's decline are drawn directly from Miller's life: the sudden move from a spacious Manhattan apartment to a cramped house in Brooklyn, his mother's shock at having to perform housework, his father's baffled despair as his business vanishes, and the iconic stolen bicycle which taught the young Miller the hard lesson that "there is no immunity" (Bigsby, 2005, p. 339). Rose Baum, like Miller's mother Augusta, is a proud woman forced to confront her husband's failure and the loss of her son's bright future, her constant, desperate piano playing providing a dissonant soundtrack to the family's disintegration. Moe, like Miller's father Isadore, is a man whose identity was entirely bound up in his success, and who is left adrift and powerless when it is stripped away.

By labelling the play "A Vaudeville," Miller adds another layer of complexity. The term suggests a variety of entertainments—songs, dances, comedy sketches—which seems jarringly at odds with the grim subject matter. Yet, this choice is deliberate. It highlights the surreal, almost performative nature of the era. The 1920s had been a "decade of hucksterism in which reality was defined by pieces of paper (share certificates, bonds, and paper money)" (Bigsby,

p. 341). The "show" of prosperity was followed by the spectacular "act" of its collapse. The inclusion of tap-dancing and popular songs of the period creates what Bigsby calls "history as a show" (p. 338), generating a powerful irony. The upbeat tunes of the Jazz Age become haunting relics in a world of breadlines and poverty, underscoring the gap between the nation's optimistic self-image and its grim reality.

The Collapse of the American Dream and the Crisis of Identity

At its core, *The American Clock* is a profound critique of the American Dream, that foundational myth promising prosperity as a reward for hard work and ambition. The play argues that this dream is not an inherent right but a fragile construct, dependent on an economic system that can "sink without a trace at a moment's notice" (Miller, as cited in Bigsby, p. 339). For characters like Moe Baum, the crash is not just a financial loss but an existential one. His identity as a provider, a successful businessman, and a man of standing is annihilated overnight. This crisis of self is echoed across the play's landscape. As Miller researched the period, he was struck by the "psychological trauma" of unemployment: "These people were profoundly believers in the American dream and, when they stopped working, the day the money stopped, their identity was gone. They did not know who the hell they were" (as cited in Bigsby, p. 343).

The play extends this crisis of identity from the individual to the nation itself. America, a country built on a narrative of unstoppable forward momentum and "unambiguous progress," was suddenly faced with its own failure (Bigsby, p. 350). The old certainties evaporated, leaving a vacuum. In a key moment, narrator Lee Baum reflects that for a decade, people had believed "in the most important thing of all—that nothing is real!" (Miller, as cited in Bigsby, p. 343). This statement captures the speculative mania of the 1920s, a period Miller diagnoses as an "obscene trip, looking to get rich at any cost" (as cited in Bigsby, p. 340). The Depression, in this Calvinist reading, is the necessary, brutal return to reality—a national reckoning for a decade of illusion. The authority of finance, government, and even family structures is broken, leaving characters and the country adrift in a world where the old rules no longer apply.

A Broken Narrative for a Broken Time

The play's most defining feature is its structure, which was a point of contention in its initial, poorly received American production but the source of its triumph in the 1986 National Theatre production in London. Miller's script is deliberately fragmented, its "stylistic fragmentations reproduce its own subject" (Bigsby, p. 348). The narrative is broken because the world it depicts is broken. Private and public scenes interpenetrate one another so thoroughly that the distinction dissolves; family arguments about money are juxtaposed with national debates about the economy, demonstrating that "no private space [is] not invaded by the realities of social entropy" (Bigsby, p. 348).

Miller struggled with finding a production style that could unify what he called the "objective and subjective, epic and psychological" elements of the play (as cited in Bigsby, p. 347). The initial American production attempted to personalise and streamline the narrative, a choice Miller later regretted as a concession to the "Frightened Theatre" of Broadway, which shies away from large-scale social themes (Bigsby, p. 348). It was Peter Wood's London

production that finally realised Miller's vision. By incorporating a live jazz band, choreographed scene changes, and a more fluid, presentational style, the production embraced the "vaudeville" concept. It allowed the play to operate as a fluid theatrical memory, where past and present, public and private, could coexist on stage. This approach did not soften the play's tragedy but sharpened its ironies, capturing, as Bigsby (2005) notes, "that blend of the personal and the social, the despairing and the redemptive," which Miller saw as the essence of the era (p. 350).

The Enduring Warning: The Clock is Still Ticking

Miller wrote *The American Clock* not as a piece of historical nostalgia but as a contemporary warning. He saw parallels between the speculative "hucksterism" of the 1920s and the mood of the 1970s and 1980s. The play's central premise is that the national trauma of the Depression was so profound that the fear of its return remains embedded in the American psyche. The narrator Lee states this explicitly in his opening speech: "Personally, I believe that deep down we are still afraid that suddenly, without warning, it may all fall apart again" (Miller, as cited in Bigsby, p. 344). The play serves as a collective memory, an attempt to summon the past as a "witness before the court of the present" (Bigsby, p. 342).

The title itself is a powerful metaphor for this cyclical view of history. As Miller explained, "there is a clock running on all civilisations. There is a beginning and an end. What is the hour? That is the question" (as cited in Bigsby, p. 350). *The American Clock* represents the nation's narrative of progress, which had seemed unstoppable until the 1930s. The play's ultimate function is to remind its audience that this clock can stop, that social and economic systems are man-made and fallible, and that the illusion of permanent prosperity is a dangerous one. It is a testament to Miller's faith in American democratic ideals, but it is a faith tempered by the hard-won knowledge of their fragility. He insists that survival depends on "a renewed awareness of the American's improvisational strength, his almost subliminal faith that things can and must be made to work out," while simultaneously leaving the "question of ultimate survival... hanging unanswered in the air" (Bigsby, p. 349).

Conclusion

The American Clock is one of Arthur Miller's most formally inventive and politically resonant plays. It is a work that defies easy categorisation, weaving together the epic and the intimate, history and memory, tragedy and vaudeville. By fracturing the narrative and presenting a kaleidoscopic vision of the Great Depression, Miller effectively mirrors the social and psychological fragmentation of the era. The play stands as a powerful dramatisation of a nation forced to confront the failure of its founding myths—individualism, manifest destiny, and the inevitability of progress. Through the deeply personal story of the Baum family, Miller anchors this vast historical mural in tangible human suffering, transforming public trauma into private tragedy. More than just a look back at the 1930s, the play is a timeless and urgent meditation on the cyclical nature of history and the fragility of civilised order. It is Miller's insistence that we remember the lessons of the past, not as inert history, but as a living force that continues to shape the present. *The American Clock* challenges its audience to ask a vital

question: in an age of uncertainty and vast economic inequality, what is the hour on the clock now? The ticking is a sound that Miller ensures we will not easily forget.

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