Modern Language Association
129th Annual Convention
Chicago, January 9-12, 2014

Session 192: Round Table Discussion – Arthur Miller: Self and Tragedy
Thursday, January 9, 7:00-8:15 p.m.

Developments in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology during the past 30 years have led to a new approach to the study of literature: cognitive cultural studies, an approach that explores ways in which our understanding of the evolution and functioning of the human brain enlightens our understanding and appreciation of various forms of cultural expression. The current liveliness of this approach can be seen in a variety of recent events:

2. The transition of the MLA discussion group on cognitive studies into a new MLA division in 2011: Cognitive Approaches to Literature (D088)
3. The organization of a major international conference at Bangor University in Wales in April 2013 on cognitive approaches to the humanities.

The Arthur Miller Society is proposing a special session that brings together two experts in cognitive approaches to literature and two theater scholars who specialize in the works of Arthur Miller to discuss the relationship between our concepts of the self and Arthur Miller’s concept of tragedy. The four participants will discuss how Miller’s vision of tragedy provides a particularly fertile subject for a cognitive literary approach and how a cognitive approach can enrich our understanding of Miller’s plays.

As Ben Brantley, the theater critic of The New York Times, noted in a recent issue of The Arthur Miller Journal, “Every one of Miller’s plays is steeped in a sense of guilt that taints each of its characters; they all take place ‘after the fall.’” (7.1&2 (2012): 2). The crisis that prompts the collapse of the narrative that constitutes a person’s sense of self generally takes place in Miller’s plays before the action begins. Miller approaches tragedy not as a depiction of the moment a character confronts his flawed self-narrative but as a depiction of his characters’ floundering to find a new psychological equilibrium after the confrontation has occurred, “after the fall.” This certainly is true of Joe Keller and his family in *All My Sons* (1947), Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), John Proctor in *The Crucible* (1953), Quentin in *After the Fall* (1964), and Victor, the younger brother, in *The Price* (1968). It is this approach to tragedy and its focus on the importance of a truthful acceptance of one’s role in the past and one’s responsibility for the present that makes problems of the self so central to Miller’s plays and makes these plays such suitable subjects for a cognitive approach to literary interpretation. Miller is among our most insightful playwrights in his exploration of how a person creates a self, how that self goes into crisis, and the ordeal a person confronts after a self has collapsed. For this reason, the Arthur Miller Society believes this roundtable discussion will be especially lively.
and informative. For cognitive scholars, it will reveal the ways in which Miller’s plays provide fruitful areas of study. For Miller scholars, it will reveal the value of the cognitive approach.

Despite the fact that many of Miller's greatest plays were written 60 years ago, he continues to be one of the most widely produced dramatist in the world. There is something in Miller’s work that continues to resonate with audiences. Therefore, as we approach the centennial of Miller’s birth in 2015, it is especially fitting to have a discussion that explores how the appeal of Miller's plays may be grounded in the universal evolutionary and psychological foundations of human nature.

The Arthur Miller Society also believes this roundtable is suitable for inclusion in the 2014 MLA Presidential Forum on the theme of “Vulnerable Times.” This theme encourages sessions about the “vulnerabilities of life;” the psychological, social, and political forces that lead to these vulnerabilities; and the sources of human resilience in confronting them. It seeks topics that put divergent fields into mutually productive conversations that broaden each field’s focus and enrich its development. That is exactly what this roundtable also seeks. Perhaps no psychological suffering makes a person feel more confused and vulnerable than the collapse of a sense of self, for if we do not have secure beliefs about who we are, we have no idea how to act or engage with the world. If we refuse to confront truthfully, as Miller says, how our present emerged from our past, we run the risk of never emerging from a crippling lack of authenticity. Miller’s plays repeatedly tell the stories of people struggling to make this painful journey back from the devastating experience of an inauthentic self to some kind of equilibrium and self-acceptance, people going through their own personal “vulnerable times.”

By bringing experts on cognitive literary studies together with experts on Arthur Miller’s vision of tragedy, this roundtable seeks to reveal some of the most fundamental of human universals: the vulnerability of the self, the crises that undermine our sense of personal identity, the pain of the struggle to recover from a collapsed self, and the need for our mutual interdependence and forgiveness as we seek an authentic experience of who we are and how we got here. For Miller, tragedy is the story of our often self-deluding and bumbling struggle toward personal truth, a journey that is among the most fundamental universals of the human condition. This roundtable explores that story, both from the perspective of Miller’s vision of tragedy and from the perspective of cognitive universals of human life.

We envision the 75-minute roundtable having the following four sections:

1. A five-minute introduction of the roundtable topic and the four participants by the presider;
2. A 20-minute section in which each participant gives a brief opening statement (five minutes for each of four participants, roughly 500-600 words each);
3. A 25-minute discussion among the participants;
4. A 25-minute discussion including questions and comments from members of the roundtable’s audience.
Presider: **David Palmer** is an assistant professor of philosophy in the Humanities Department at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. He has been an active member of the Arthur Miller Society since 2009 and has presented and published essays on Miller and on similarities between Miller’s and Samuel Beckett’s visions of tragedy. His interests in ethics and philosophy of mind led him to explore the cognitive approach to literary analysis; to the creation of a new course, "The Brain, Narrative, and the Self," which takes a cognitive approach to tragedy; and to the publication of his most recent article: “Tragedy, Integrity, Guilt, and Shame: Understanding John Proctor,” which appeared in the fall 2012 special issue of the *Arthur Miller Journal* devoted to *The Crucible*.

**Cognitive Studies Scholars:**


**Arthur Miller Scholars:**

**Stephen A. Marino** is one of the half dozen most broadly recognized Miller scholars in the world. In 2006, he founded *The Arthur Miller Journal* and continues as its editor. He has organized many Miller conferences, including the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the debut of *Death of a Salesman* in 1999, and the celebration of the 60th anniversary of
Miller’s first Broadway play, a conference which Arthur Miller himself attended in 2004 at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, where Professor Marino teaches. He edited *The Salesman Has a Birthday*, a collection of essays celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Death of a Salesman* (University Press of America, 2000) and authored *A Language Study of Arthur Miller’s Plays: The Poetic in the Colloquial* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2002) and a commentary and critical edition of Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* (Methuen, 2010). He currently is working on a new book entitled *Arthur Miller’s New York*.

**Matthew Roudané**, the Regents’ Professor of English at Georgia State University, is the recipient of several Fulbright grants and has published broadly on many aspects of American and world theater. His publications on American theater include major works on Edward Albee, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Tennessee Williams, and August Wilson, in addition to Arthur Miller. As a Miller scholar, he has published numerous articles and two books: *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (1987) and *Approaches to Teaching Miller’s ‘Death of a Salesman’* (1995). His third book on Miller, *The Cambridge Introduction to Arthur Miller* is forthcoming. As a dramaturge, he worked with director Joseph Chaikin on a production of Miller’s *Broken Glass*. He is the long-time editor of *The South Atlantic Review*; the Advisory Series Editor of Methuen Drama, Student Editions; and a member of the Board of Directors of The Arthur Miller Society.