Domestic Tragedies: The Feminist Dilemma in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

*The dominant political context at that time [of early Second Wave Feminism] was the New Left, particularly the anti-war movement and the opposition to militarized U.S. imperialism. The dominant paradigm among progressive intellectuals was Marxism, in various forms . . . Marxism, no matter how modified, seemed unable to fully grasp the issues of gender difference and the oppression of women.*

Gayle Rubin, 1994 interview with Judith Butler (63)

Although Gayle Rubin’s 1994 interview with Judith Butler addresses the second-wave feminism that post-dates *Death of a Salesman*’s 1949 debut by some twenty years, Rubin’s comments muster relevance when we consider Arthur Miller’s seminal work, one often described as his “American Masterpiece,” which explores the perils of unchecked capitalism. Labeling Miller as a Marxist might be a stretch toward the left. But the socialist-imbued messages that emerge throughout Willy Loman’s despair—a despair arising out of his repeated failure to achieve the mid-century middle class articulation of an “American Dream”—certainly point to an aggressive critique of Western materialism and the frequent, painful side-effects for those in its wake. More than just a cautionary tale opposing American ideologies of wealth and self-value, Miller’s Pulitzer Prize- and New York Drama Critics Circle Award-winning play helped garner him a 1956 subpoena to testify before the U.S. Senate during the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings—an experience which left the playwright cited for contempt of Congress, assigned one year’s suspended sentence, and fined $500 for refusing to name names.¹ Indeed, Arthur Miller’s increasing disgust with the right-wing paranoia seizing the Cold War culture of mid-century America also prompted him to write *The Crucible* (1953), which, aside from his classic work, *Death of a Salesman*, is his most frequently produced play.

Thus, while Miller’s views might not seem *synonymous* with Marxist or even Communist doctrine, the left-minded politics of his public actions...
and some of his most famous plays safely place him within the broader context of the leftist ideologies that critique dehumanizing hegemonies—
hegemonies often common to Western, capitalist, and often imperialist cultural paradigms. Gayle Rubin’s criticism of Marxist thought and activism during the anti-war 1970s, specifically Marxism’s inability to sufficiently address gender inequality and its role in economic oppression, becomes relevant in a broader discussion of Miller and Willy Loman’s dilemma. The play’s condemnation of the oppression and inequality intrinsic to the Western, materialistic, free market culture of a so-called American Dream, one that places the individual and material accumulation over societal concerns and equality, is central here. As most critics easily agree, capitalist models of greed and externally validating materialism are under attack in Miller’s play. (For example, in addition to Willy’s downward progression, we learn of a “successful” Ben who makes his fortune by depleting Alaskan natural resources and occupying a neocolonial presence in African diamond mines.) Yet Miller’s treatise on the menace of Western greed and the esteem of the self-interested individual over society also proves an interesting test case to explore women’s agency as it does (not) reside within broader critiques of hegemony.

Generated out of second-wave feminism, Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975) offers, among other things, the contention that women exist as objects of exchange, and, further, as a culturally constructed institution, heterosexual marriage frequently facilitates this paradigm. As an anthropologist, feminist critic, and queer theorist, Rubin has since updated, problematized, and augmented her claims significantly. But her initial exploration of women’s function as commodity, not to mention the (im)possibility of agency via their role as wife-mother subjects in and out of the private domain, retains significance when we consider the vast number of canonical texts, such as Death of a Salesman, which construct women in what appear to be powerless roles—dramatic constructs existing merely for the support of more three-dimensional, complex male protagonists. That Arthur Miller’s Cold War family drama is still conceived by many scholars as an ultimately human, universal, and cross-culturally relevant text—one that meets with the continued commercial as well as critical success that characterized it from its initial 1949 production—would seem to make its constructions of gender, family, and individual power all the more relevant.

Heralded as one of the more successful examples of mid-century dramatic realism that a still-emerging American drama had produced,