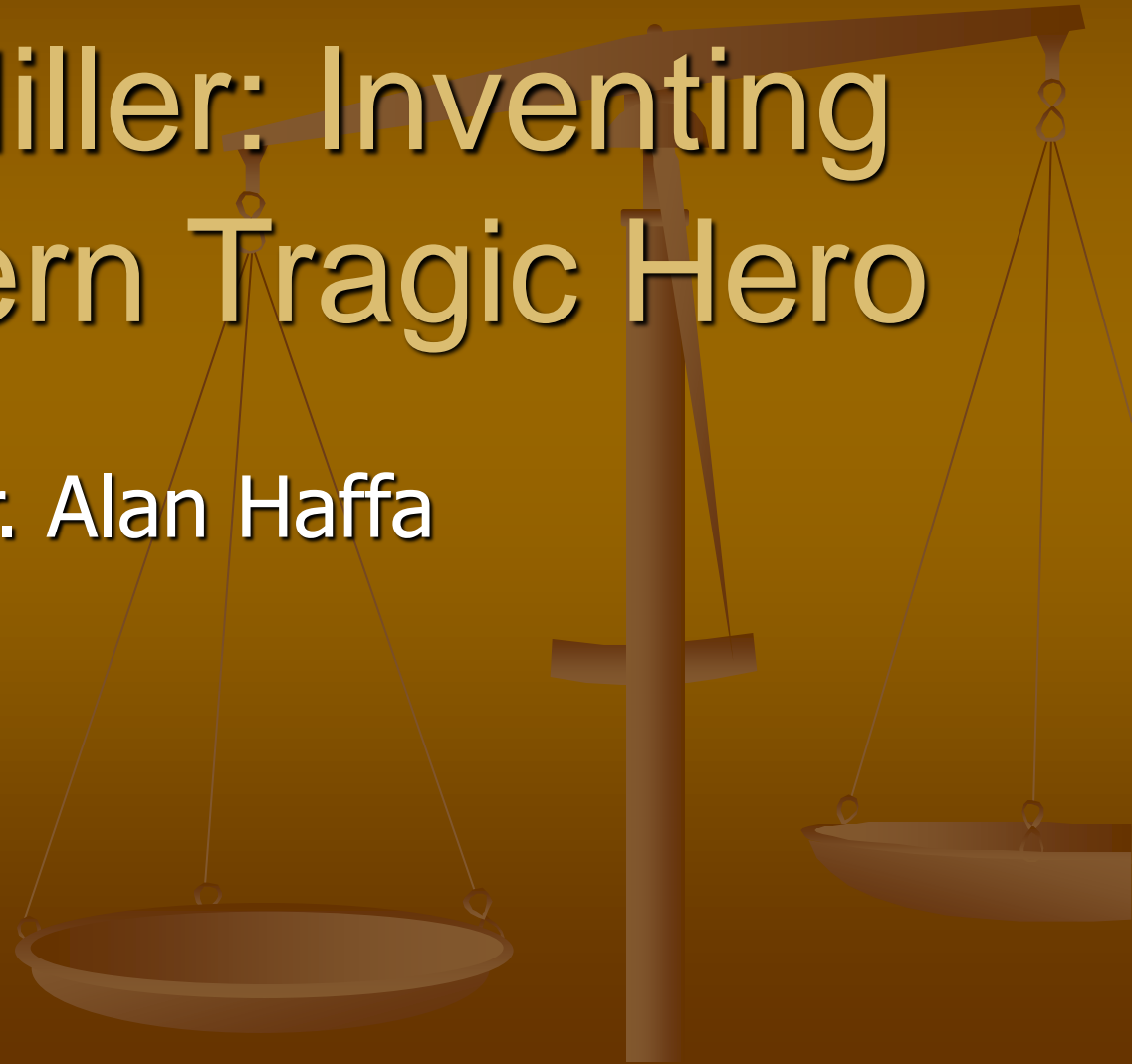


# Arthur Miller: Inventing the Modern Tragic Hero

Dr. Alan Haffa

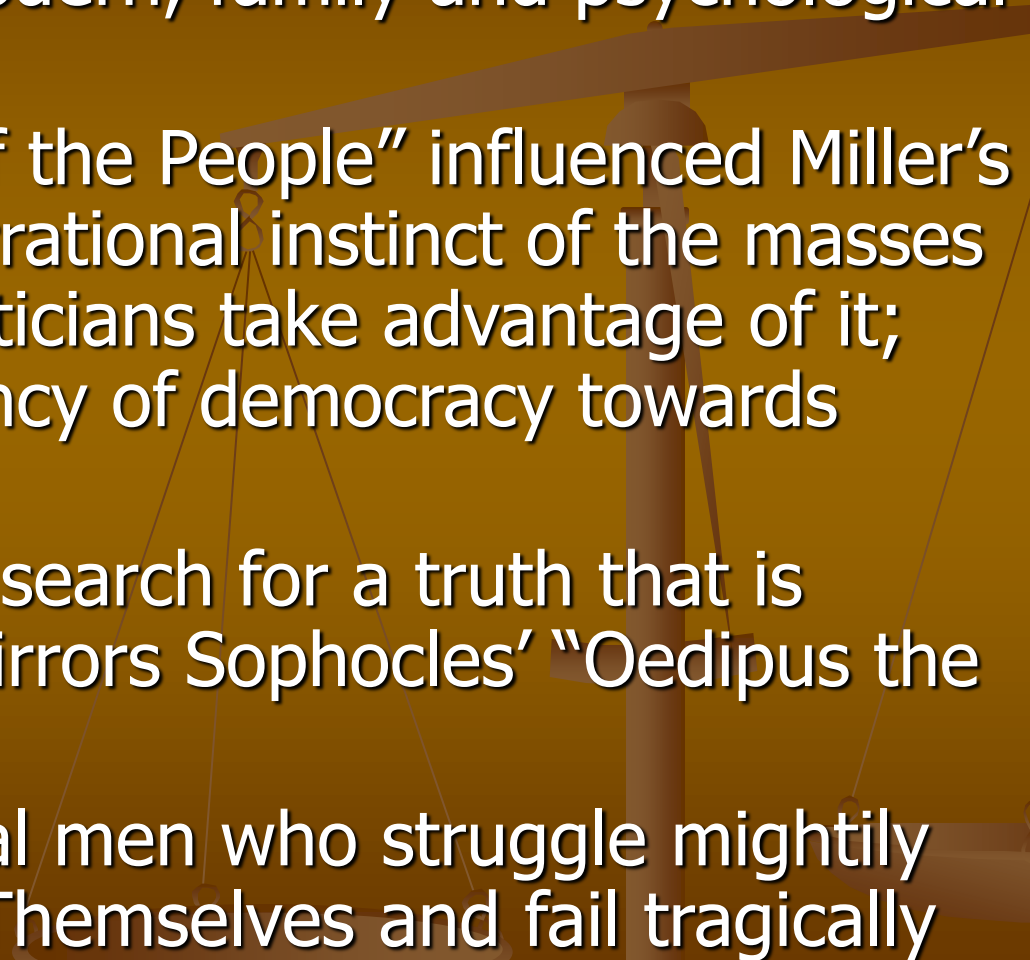


# Biography (1915-2005)

- Father was a self-made businessman, manufacturing woman's clothing
- Family fortune ruined by depression; move to Harlem and later Brooklyn
- Miller worked a variety of odd jobs and saved his money; later attended Univ. of Michigan; studied journalism and drama—especially Greek plays and Ibsen
- Married and had two children; exempted from WW II
- 1949: Salesman won Pulitzer and three Tony Awards; 1953, *Crucible*
- 1956: Divorced his wife to marry Marilyn Monroe; also appeared before the Committee for Un-American Activities
- 1957: Contempt of Congress; 58, overturned
- 1961: Left Monroe for another woman whom he married

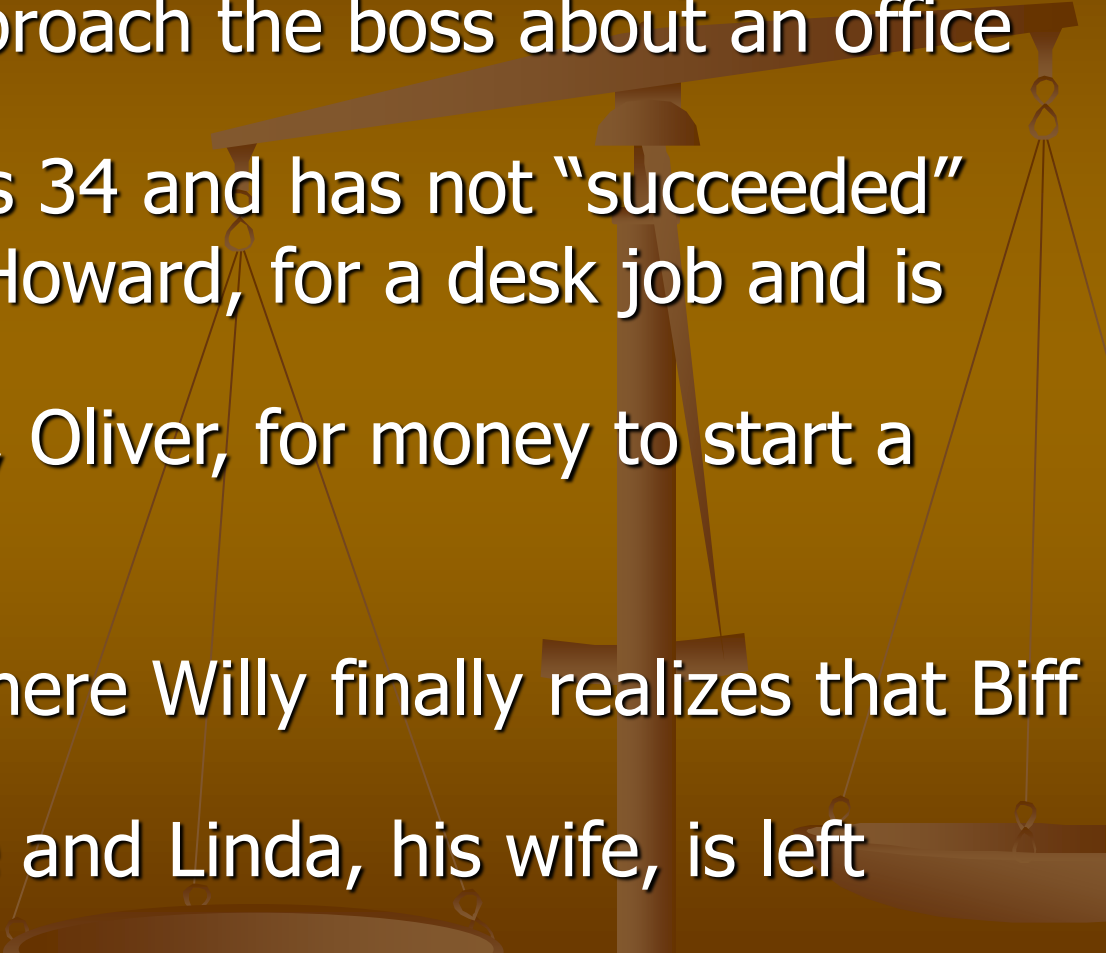


# Influence of Greek Theater and Ibsen

- Ibsen created the modern, family and psychological drama
  - Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People" influenced Miller's "The Crucible"; the irrational instinct of the masses and how corrupt politicians take advantage of it; critique of the tendency of democracy towards demagoguery
  - In "All My Sons," the search for a truth that is collectively denied mirrors Sophocles' "Oedipus the King"
  - His heroes are normal men who struggle mightily against Society and Themselves and fail tragically
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# Death of a Salesman (1948)

## Summarized

- Willy Loman returns from a failed sales trip; wife Linda persuades him to approach the boss about an office job;
  - Biff and Happy; Biff is 34 and has not “succeeded”
  - Willie asks his boss, Howard, for a desk job and is fired
  - Biff asks his old Boss, Oliver, for money to start a ranch; rejection
  - The broken Party
  - Last Confrontation where Willy finally realizes that Biff does love him
  - Willy commits suicide and Linda, his wife, is left devastated
- 

# Willy Loman as Tragic Hero

- The tragedy of the common man
- Disjunction between his idea of himself and the reality
- His tragic flaw, and what makes him noble, is his resolute unwillingness to accept the reality for himself or his sons; Like Oedipus
- “Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment.”
- “in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.” Think King Lear; Willie is like Lear in his demand that his children love him;

# A Commentary on America and Capitalism

- Everything has a price, even a man
- Willy has worked for thirty five years only to be cast off now that he is no longer profitable to the company. This is the reality of capitalism.
- Willy is so consumed with the drive to achieve the American dream (all his possessions) that he loses himself and his family
- America is filled with Willy Lomans": average guys who have big dreams. Charley says of Willy: "Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's 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. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

# Crucible (1953) Plot Summary

- Set in Salem, Mass.; girls go dancing with Tituba, a black slave and are caught by Rev. Parris; daughter of Parris, Betty is “possessed”
- Rev. Hale arrives; interrogates Tituba and she confesses to witchcraft and devilry.
- What follows is a hunt for witches—those who “confess” are forgiven but those who deny are punished
- John Proctor confesses; but then tears up the confession and retracts his admission; Proctor goes to the gallows

# Absolutist, Intolerant Ideology

- Judge Danforth in Act III: “You must understand, sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is a sharp time, now, a precise time—we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world. Now, by God’s grace, the shining sun is up, and them that fear not light will surely praise it.”
- Reflects how Danforth sees the world as either black or white, good or evil. The court and state, appointed by God, must be good; whomever opposes it by definition must be evil.
- Even questioning the trials is evil.

# McCarthyism

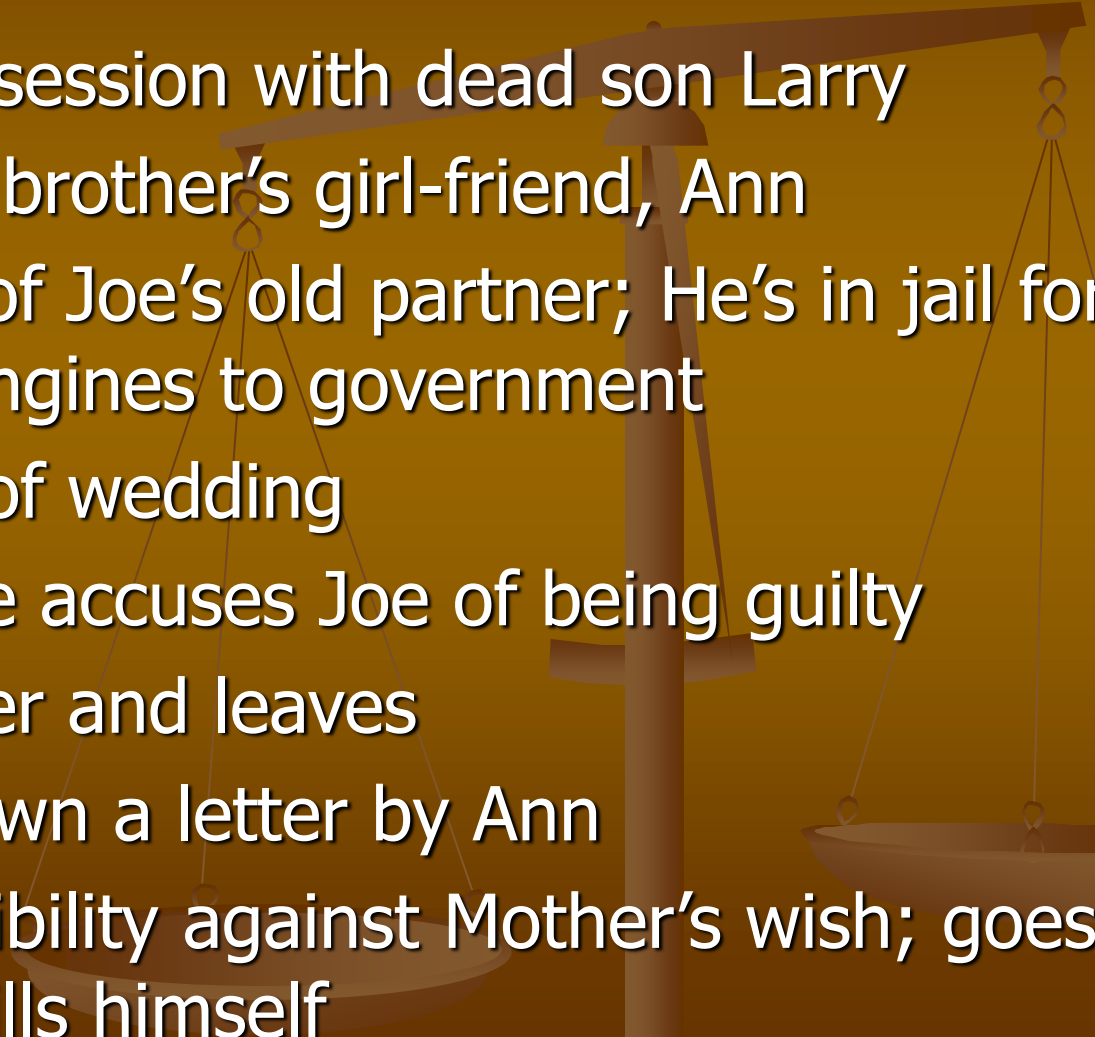


- Parallels between the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Salem Witch trials
- Miller himself was called to testify and refused to name anyone
- The play reflects upon the intolerant and zealous pursuit of alleged Communists that rode rough shod over individual liberties.
- Like the Salem suspects, Communist suspects were encouraged to name names as a way to save themselves
- Miller later reflected on the ritualistic nature of the hearings and the need for public admissions

# Miller On McCarthyism

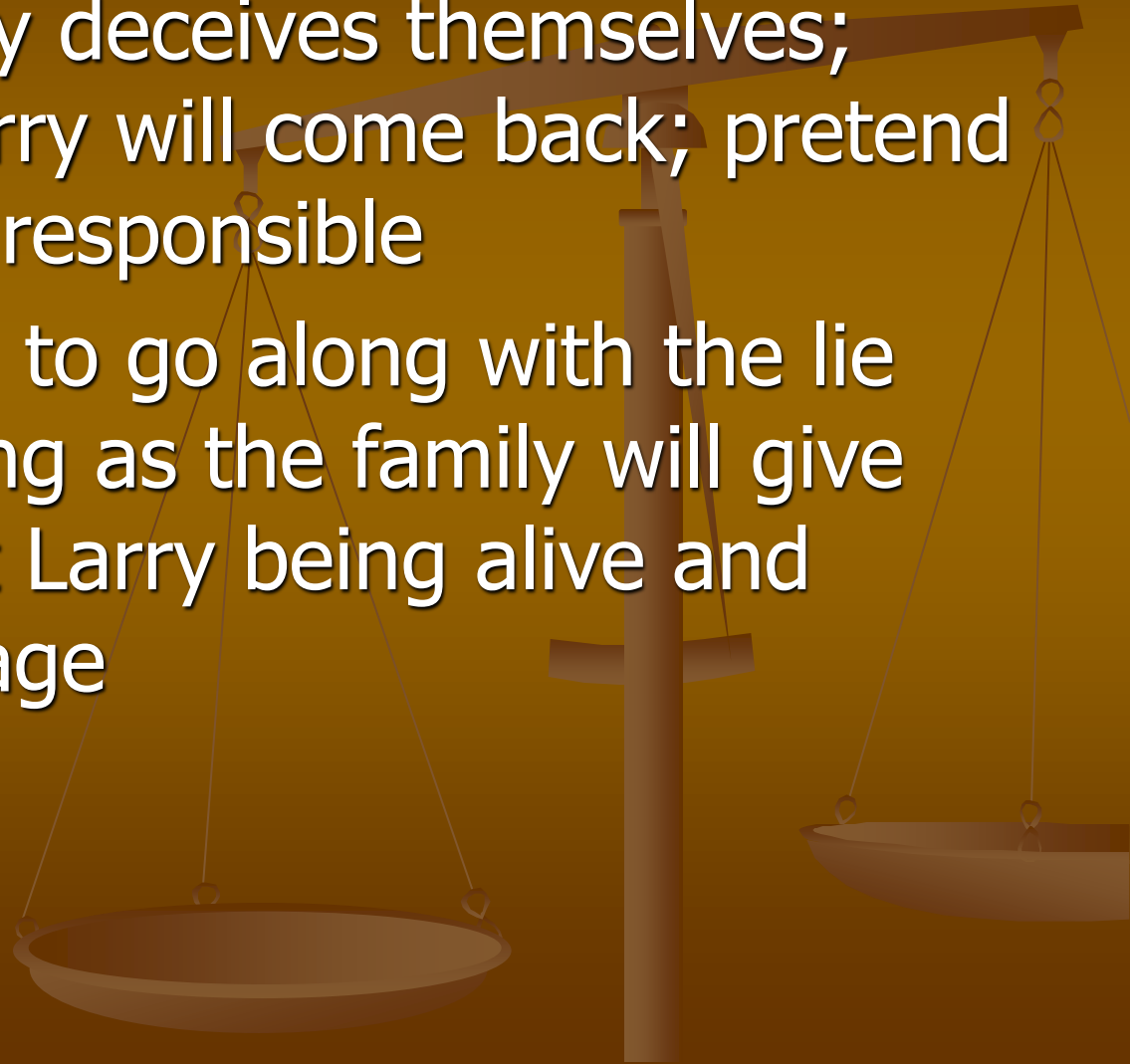
- He recalls “The Hook” about union corruption on the Brooklyn waterfront. Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures, did something that would once have been considered unthinkable: he showed my script to the F.B.I. Cohn then asked me to take the gangsters in my script, who were threatening and murdering their opponents, and simply change them to Communists. When I declined to commit this idiocy ...I got a wire from Cohn saying, “The minute we try to make the script pro-American you pull out.” By then—it was 1951—I had come to accept this terribly serious insanity as routine, but there was an element of the marvelous in it which I longed to put on the stage. (New Yorker)

# “All My Sons”

- Joe Keller and Tree
  - Kate, Mother, and obsession with dead son Larry
  - Chris Keller loves his brother's girl-friend, Ann
  - Ann is the daughter of Joe's old partner; He's in jail for selling faulty plane engines to government
  - Mom won't approve of wedding
  - Ann's brother, George accuses Joe of being guilty
  - Chris rejects his father and leaves
  - Next day Mom is shown a letter by Ann
  - Father takes responsibility against Mother's wish; goes into the house and kills himself
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# Self Deception

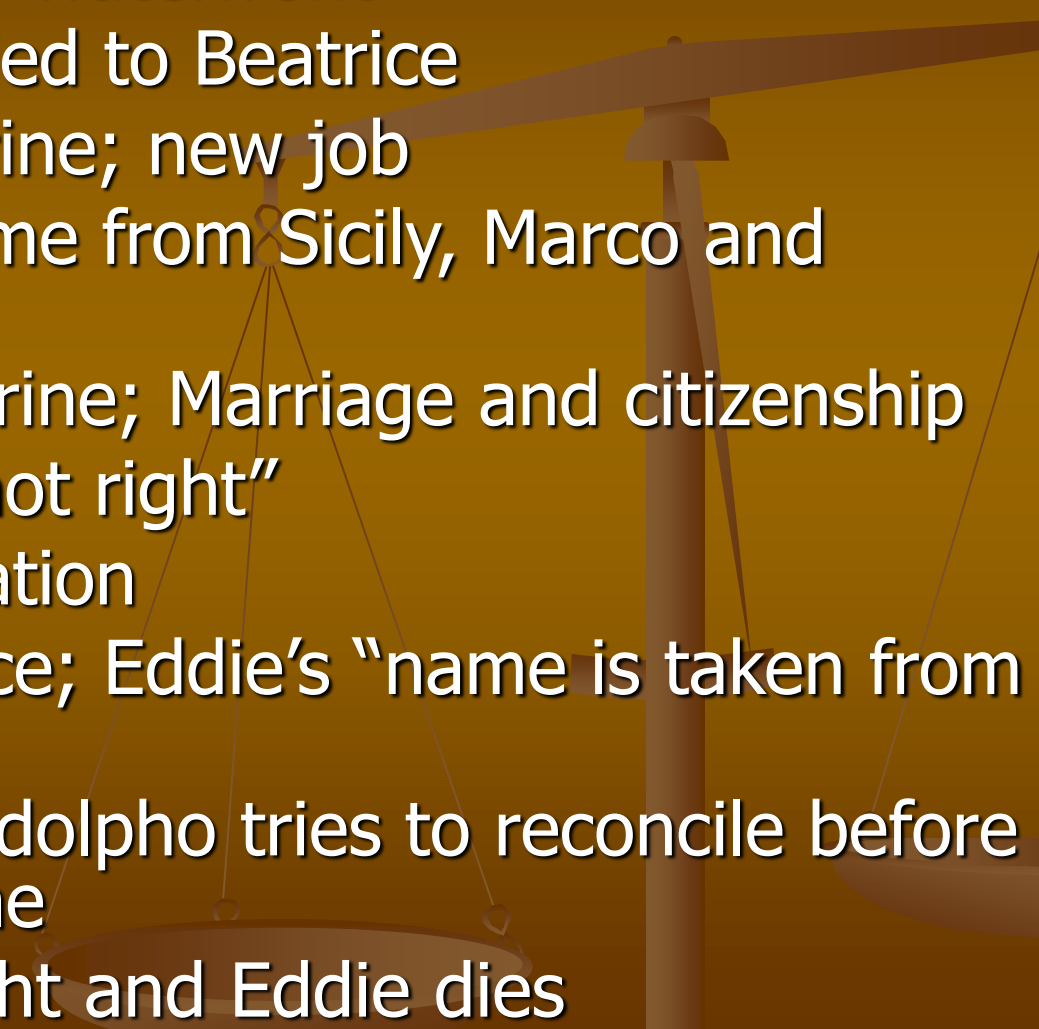
- The Keller family deceives themselves; pretend that Larry will come back; pretend that Joe wasn't responsible
- Ann is prepared to go along with the lie about Joe as long as the family will give up the lie about Larry being alive and allow the marriage



# Critique of Capitalism

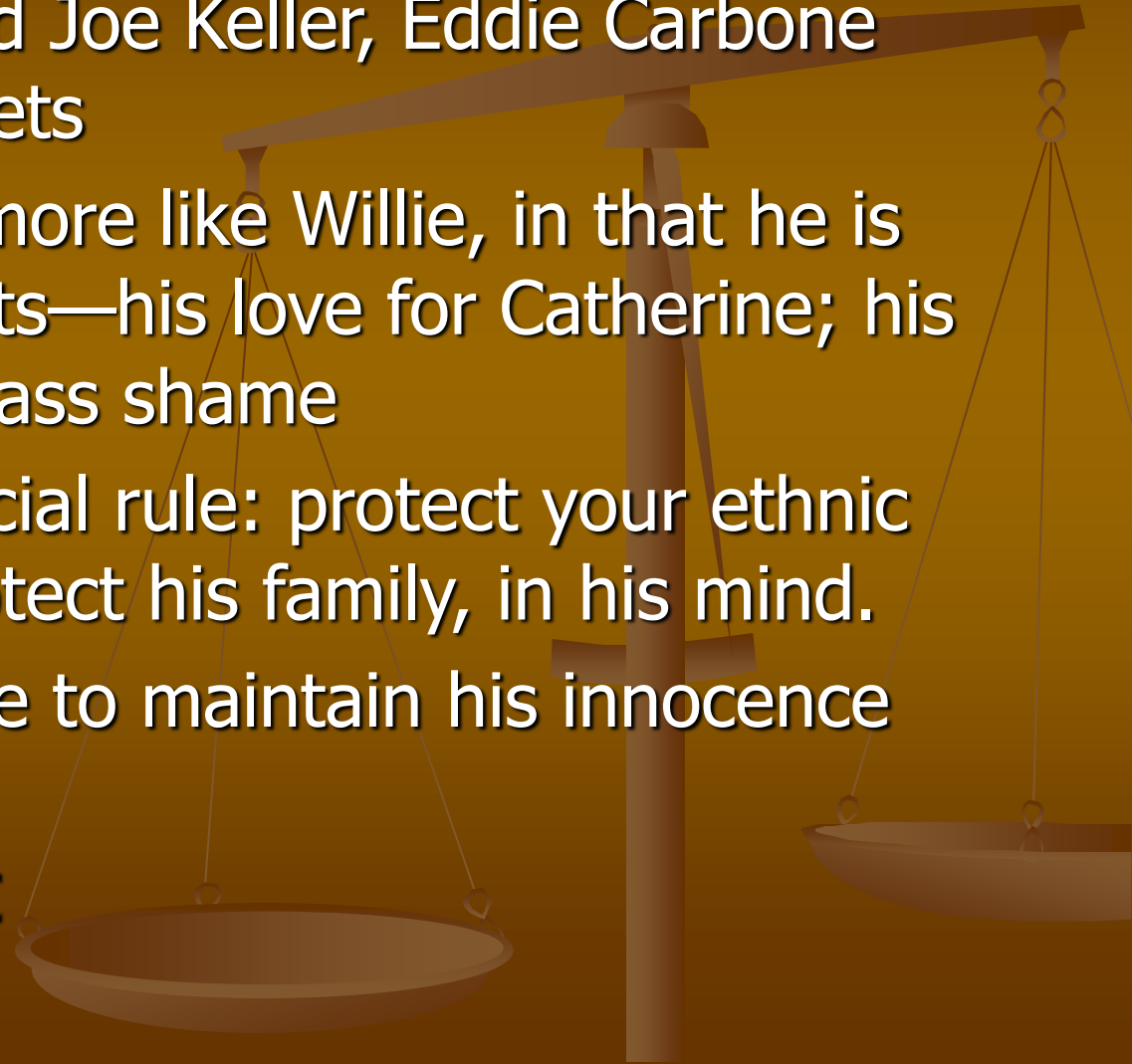
- Greed pushed Joe to ship those machines
- His son Chris is idealistic; he saw men die in Europe, sacrificing themselves; but in business he sees a dog eat dog world
- Dad: "You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work, you're out of business; you don't know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell's it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?"
- After the letter: Joe, "Sure, he was my son. **But I think to him they were all sons.** And I guess they were, I guess they were. I'll be right down."

# *A View from the Bridge, 1956*

- Alfieri, lawyer on the waterfront
  - Eddie Carbone married to Beatrice
  - Raised niece, Catherine; new job
  - Two cousins of B come from Sicily, Marco and Rodolpho
  - Rodolpho and Catherine; Marriage and citizenship
  - Jealousy and "He's not right"
  - Turned in to immigration
  - Marco spits in his face; Eddie's "name is taken from him"
  - Released on bail, Rodolpho tries to reconcile before marriage to Catherine
  - Marco and Eddie Fight and Eddie dies
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# Eddie and Truth of Himself

- Like Willie Loman and Joe Keller, Eddie Carbone and family have secrets
- Unlike Joe, Eddie is more like Willie, in that he is unaware of his secrets—his love for Catherine; his self-hatred bred of class shame
- He broke cardinal social rule: protect your ethnic group in order to protect his family, in his mind.
- Yet he is willing to die to maintain his innocence within his culture
- Elia Kazan and HUAC



# Summary

- In *Salesman*, Miller invents a new dramatic technique based upon the concurrence of Past and Present
- He invents a hero in Willy Loman who is the tragic hero of the common man
- Proctor is another hero who is driven by his desire to reconcile Society's view of him with his own inner reality
- In "*All My Sons*," conflict of group self-deception and Truth explodes a tragic ending; conflict of idealistic love of country with greedy, capitalistic love of self
- Miller is to be commended for holding up a mirror to ourselves to examine both our greatness and our faults