"No Country for Old Men": A Poignant Portrayal of Aging and Ageism in Arthur Miller's *Mr. Peters' Connections*

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ABSTRACT

Mr. Peters' Connections (1998) is often viewed as Arthur Miller's most experimental late play. Yet, despite its uniqueness and evident dramatic value, scholarly commentary usually focuses on its likeness with Pinter and Beckett plays and sometimes on how it is an apt product of an "octogenarian" mind. Although the play is also an apropos depiction of the dilemma of aging in ageist America, no scholarly work has analyzed it through the lens of critical gerontology or age studies. Drawing on gerontological studies and research, the essay sheds light on the meaninglessness and disillusionment suffered by elderly adults every day of their lives—the struggles whose apt embodiment we find in Mr. Harry Peters, the central character of Miller's play. (AS)

KEYWORDS: Arthur Miller, *Mr. Peters' Connections*, ageist society; aging and ageism in America; critical gerontology, age studies

Arthur Miller's late play *Mr. Peters' Connections* (1998) is a moving portrayal of what it is like to grow old in modern times and experience a loss of vital connections. It also offers a significant commentary on how the disconnectedness experienced by older adults is a direct consequence of a predominantly ageist atmosphere. On the face of it, however, the play is a massive muddle of mundane conversation with many voices focused on individual agendas, stuck amongst whom is Mr. Harry Peters, the play's central character, making desperate attempts to catch hold of the "subject." Peters embodies the constant "otherness" older adults must face in a world where aging is viewed more as a kind of "virus," a terminal disease rather than as a natural course of human existence.

From the moment Peters appears onstage, there is a feeling of the show already being over. Caught somewhere between "life and death" (Abbotson 249), between "waking and sleeping" (Miller and Gussow 185), he happens to wander into an "*old abandoned nightclub in New York City*," where around a "*dusty upright piano*" some furniture lies "*upended*" (Miller, *Collected Plays*[1] 401). He came to this neighborhood to buy himself a pair of extra narrow shoes that he finds only at a local store owned by Larry and then happened to venture into the surreal space of the nightclub to wait for his

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wife, Charlotte, whose name he keeps blocking out until towards the end when she finally joins him. A former Pan Am pilot, having once "flown into hundreds of gorgeous sunsets" (420), Peters is now at that stage of life where the future appears vague and the past rather distant. "*Undirected to anyone*," he says, "deep down I always seem on the verge of weeping. God knows why, when I have everything" (401).

In Peters one encounters both a desperate need for death and its fear. Indeed, it is both his quest for meaning and his feeling of meaninglessness that have brought him to this bizarre nightclub, where he may have his chance to reflect upon his long life—and perhaps decipher its meaning, its "subject." It is here that he would meet his "connections," the people who once meant something to him, but now, looking back, all of them appear as perfect strangers he has to make an effort to know again; only he is too tired now. In his preface for the play's 1998 edition, Miller defines it as a play "taking place inside Mr. Peters' mind, or at least on its threshold, from where it is still possible to glance back toward daylight life or forward into the misty depths" (Preface viii). The playwright mentions that Mr. Peters's "connections," some alive and some dead, are the main characters of the drama of his life and that the entire action of the play "is the procession of Mr. Peters' moods," each of them beckoning up the next (viii). All of Peters's dispositions embody his anxieties and fears. His dialogue throughout the play points again and again to a state of weariness, fatigue, numbness, and a feeling of complete resignation. He feels so utterly exhausted that at three different points in his conversations with other characters, he clarifies that "conflict" and "suspense" are not his game anymore (Miller, *Collected* 402); he is too old for "sad stories" (409) and too old to face "reality" (407)—just too old for the world. He feels he has lived enough and that now he must look "forward to a warm oblivion" (431). Just a few pages into the play Harry Peters appears as a terribly hopeless, aging man.

An inability to grasp the "subject," feeling meaningless and reduced—all seemingly "normal" aspects of aging—are thus depicted as intrinsically connected with the problem of ageism in Miller's portrayal. Robert Scanlan calls *Mr. Peters' Connections* "a theatrical summation" of all of Miller's plays that precede it (187), and Susan Abbotson suggests it can be broadly understood as a study of the lives of older adults (246). Yet, despite the play's apparent merit and the concerns it accentuates, like most other late pieces in the Miller canon, *Mr. Peters' Connections* lies largely unexplored by both scholars and audiences. The essay looks at the play through the lens of critical gerontology and analyzes how in the course of Miller's narration Peters emerges as a

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moving representation of scores of American seniors for whom the present is appalling and the future offers little hope. Without making it a loud agenda, the playwright shows us how an ageist environment contributes to older adults' dilemmas. Miller portrays this predicament and argues the case for older adults in a society that could not care less for them. The perplexed, wake-sleep state of the play's titular character is a symbolic representation of how older adults feel unanchored amidst the mammoth changes taking place around them, as Miller imaginatively underlines the utter helplessness, isolation, and agony of growing old.

The perils of aging in an ageist society: Persecution through prejudices and stereotypes

Miller himself referred to *Mr. Peters' Connections* as an "outrageous piece of work," a "funny play" (Miller and Gussow 185), which moves forward in such a way that, unguided by Miller's preface, it becomes impossible to even decode who among its characters is dead and who is still alive. Yet, despite the complete disarray that this play appears to be, the dilapidated nightclub emerges as a symbol for society at large—a world full of "living dead" and "known strangers." The whole process of understanding Peters's feelings of isolation and purposelessness can be "a numbing experience" for the audience as the playwright creatively draws "parallels" between the life of a worn-out, aging man nearing the end of his life and the "spiritual weariness" of the fatigued nation he lives in (Brantley, "Meaning"). It is an apt depiction of the existential dilemma commonly experienced by older adults in the contemporary environment, where no one has any spare time to pay heed to another's quest for meaning. Not pointing at one specific problem of older adults, Miller subtly draws attention to several. Notably, the playwright manages to do this without ever mentioning the term "ageism" anywhere in the play's text. Only meanderingly does Miller comment on how casual, often unintended ageist remarks and prejudices kill the contentment of growing old and how, similarly to "race" and "gender," "age" is a significant marker of discrimination in many societies.

Simone de Beauvoir, who is mostly acclaimed for her feminist manifesto rather than for her annotations on old age, brings into light the common frustrations and isolation experienced by older adults in *La Vieillesse* [The Coming of Age], pointing to the myriad factors that render older adults lonely, inadequate, and mostly useless. De Beauvoir discusses how a "long tradition" of viewing old age negatively has loaded the word "old" with "pejorative connotations" (288). In her view, ageist prejudices engulf many

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modern societies to such an extent that numerous older adults attempt to be perceived as very "old," even before they have reached that state—because, oftentimes, it is "less tiring to let oneself go than to fight" (286). In their essay "Acting Your Age," Sarit A. Golub et al. discuss how the tag "old" or "elderly," in agreement with the generally established stereotype, implies "incompetent" (289). Ashton Applewhite, a leading anti-ageism activist and the author of *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*, discusses how negative social conditioning teaches us to loathe the whole process of aging, seeing it only as a "trauma" (44–45). Ageist stereotypes internalized since childhood may "interfere with the value that the elderly place on their own lives" (Golub et al. 291), which is why many older adults themselves turn into the "worst ageists" and avoid activities they do not find "age appropriate" (Applewhite 43). Ursula A. Falk and Gerard Falk state that assumed stereotypes also force older adults to act befuddled and "mindless" (27), which is again a direct outcome of internalizing "stereotypes of olders as useless and debilitated" (Applewhite 44). Harry Peters, too, is a product of an ageist culture that inhibits his enthusiasm for life. In a youth-worshipping world "we're supposed to deny being old" (Showalter xi), yet we see Peters making a concerted effort to be identified as an "old man." Peters constantly exaggerates how old and tired he feels while there are other characters telling him that he does not look "all that old" (*CP* 403).

> CALVIN. You've been around.
> PETERS. And around again, yes—Pan Am captain twenty-six years. I'm really much older than I look. If you planted an apple tree when I was born you'd be cutting it down for firewood by now.
> CALVIN. I was going to say, you don't look all that old.
> PETERS, *a chuckle*. I am older than everyone I ever knew. All my dogs are dead. Half a dozen cats, parakeets . . . all gone. Every pilot I ever flew with. Probably every woman I ever slept with, too, except my wife. . . . Or maybe death is polite, and we must open the door to let him in or he'll just hang around out there on the porch. (403)

Notably, even the remark "you don't look all that old," often perceived as a compliment, bears ageist connotations. De Beauvoir believes the trauma and prejudice related to old age can fill one with so much resentment that sometimes older adults "take their revenge upon the outside world by

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exaggerating their infirmity" (303), which is strongly evident in Peters's case. He feels that even his "low cholesterol" is reason enough to die (*CP* 405).

By placing at the play's center a befuddled aging man, Miller highlights the ways in which Peters's reaction to his "age" and his impatience with the idea of staying longer are not exclusively his own. Falk and Falk state that "American seniors as well as people of all ages conduct themselves in a manner expected of them by the culture which includes ageism and its attendant impositions of disability, dysfunction, and disengagement" (38). *Mr. Peters' Connections* depicts how unconcernedly ageism is practiced every day in modern societies, because of which older adults' victimization is often not even recognized as oppressive or harmful. To exemplify the same, we can consider the playwright's own case. A cursory look at some of the performance reviews of *Mr. Peters' Connections* will possibly be enough to substantiate how people are ageist in the most casual sense, without ever realizing what their words may end up doing to the self-esteem of an older adult. Stephen Fay refers to it as "the sort of play authors write when they're in their 80s" (n.pag.), and Matt Wolf calls Miller a playwright "loath to come to rest" (n.pag.). The language used in these reviews may not at all sound offensive to most people, but it is ageist and derogatory, nonetheless. If these reviews were not products of an ageist culture, they would have employed a relatively more positive vocabulary to express the same opinions, which would read something like: "it is always necessary to ask how old a writer is who is reporting his impressions of a social phenomenon as like the varying depth of a lens, the mind bends the light passing through it differently according to age" (Miller, *Collected Essays* 348), or "as playwrights and their audiences age, their dramatic subjects reflect their shifting concerns" (Switzky 140). Unfortunately, others do not use such positive language to describe the creative attempts of aging playwrights and view their works through an ageist lens. In fact, most theater reviews on *Mr. Peters' Connections* make it appear as if an octogenarian playwright has a natural duty to write about aging—because he is essentially expected to be talking about his own life.

Some of Miller's late plays do indeed address his anxieties related to aging and ageism and showcase senior men and women as their main protagonists. Among the playwright's late plays, *Elegy for a Lady*, the first part of the double bill *Two-Way Mirror* (1984), is a dialogue between Man and Proprietress, the owner of a gift shop. The subject of the conversation is that Man, a businessman, wishes to buy a farewell gift for his many years younger, dying girl-friend. Soon the talk branches out to other subjects, most importantly to Man's anxiety about his age and its effect on the relationship:

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"I love her. But I am forbidden to by my commitments, by my age, by my aching joints . . . I can't bear the sight of my face in the mirror—I am shaving my father every morning!" (*Two-Way Mirror* 18–19). As Mária Kurdi comments, "the Man, who can be regarded as an Everyman figure in modern times, . . . sees himself as an old man for whom it is no longer possible to indulge in self-forgetting activities" (269). Likewise, Miller's 1987 double bill *Danger: Memory* stages older adults grappling with memories, looking back on life, and feeling stranded—demonstrating how both excessive forgetting and remembering can prove fatal to human existence. The anxieties Miller obliquely touches upon in *Elegy for a Lady* and *Danger: Memory* receive a fuller expression in *Mr. Peters' Connections* since Peters comes across as a more comprehensive exploration of what Leonora expresses in *I Can't Remember Anything* about feeling "imaginary" (*CP* 7).[2] Nevertheless, a playwright need not be an "octogenarian" to write about aging, ageism, or memories in general. Miller was just seventeen when he wrote the initial story of his magnum opus, *Death of a Salesman*, and still in his early thirties when the play was first produced on Broadway (Bigsby 100). The fact that he could create Willy Loman at such a young age validates how one does not have to be nearing death to understand or portray the conflicts of much older adults. Loman's story, like Mr. Peters's story, is, at its heart, that of an American senior who fails to find any meaning for himself and a purpose to go on. Legend has it that so profound was the impact of *Salesman* on American business mogul Bernard Gimbel, the owner of the chain of departmental stores bearing his name, that the day after the play's opening night, the senior entrepreneur issued a notice to all his stores against firing employees based on their being "overage" (Eyre 10).

The lack of connectedness Peters and Loman feel can be attributed to America's ageist milieu that callously rejects the old and rugged in favor of the young and new. It is in Linda Loman's plea in *Salesman* where we find Miller's concern most clearly reflected: "he's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (40); and this concern is recurrent throughout Miller's career: the angst against the forces of American capitalism that render older adults such as Willy Loman and Harry Peters completely bereft of "life-force," of enthusiasm to go on and not die "like an old dog." Willy Loman's cry of anguish in the play, "they don't know me any more" (61), and his wish to be perceived of as the most "well-liked" salesman there ever was evidently correspond with Peters's desire to be recognized as the most efficient Pan

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Am pilot. Both Loman and Peters feel frustrated at how quickly the world forgets and discards old people.

Disconnect, isolation, and those perpetual longings for the "good old times"

In de Beauvoir's view, the kind of sadness and sense of loss older adults experience are often not caused by any specific misfortune but by being forced to live in a society that only offers them "boredom," a "humiliating sense of uselessness," "loneliness," and "indifference" (464). In *Mr. Peters' Connections*, Arthur Miller emphasizes how after a certain age, older adults begin to look at themselves from an external, almost detached viewpoint. They experience a sense of disconnection with the world around them and also with their own lived experiences that force them to be sometimes shocked and sometimes surprised by their current situation in society. In the second part of *La Vieillesse*, subtitled "The Being-in-the-World," de Beauvoir insists upon looking at an elderly individual as a "subject"—as someone who is inwardly aware of his state and "reacts" to it. She states that even though "old age" is what naturally happens to every living being, most people are rather "dumbfounded" when they reach this stage of life (283), and that this realization can fill them with a sense of "profound indignation" (292). Hunting frantically for a "subject," Peters himself is also the "subject" here. In its entirety, the play is all about Peters's "reaction" to his situation—his aging decay and the approaching of death. A rhythm is maintained in the dramaturgy: he recurrently loses track of his hunt for the "subject" and each time he somehow manages to get back to it. Almost fifteen times in the play, his fundamental question about the "subject" is raised but he fails to receive or find an answer. At one point, he exclaims exasperated, "there is no subject anymore" (*CP* 414). At yet another point, he says that he is just trying to find some "connection" with "continuity" with his past, which is why he must know the "subject." At the same time, he adds, "but I'm exhausted . . ." (419).

Peters's feelings of disconnect and detachment dominate his life to an extent that he is known for not speaking a single word for "eight hours at a time"; therefore, he is amazed at how fluent he feels in this ramshackle nightclub (403). This change draws attention to the fact that when encountered by memories of the past, Peters is able to talk, express, and wrestle once again with the "subject." He meets and strikes up conversations with people at the nightclub, never forgetting to pose his question about the "subject." He first converses with Calvin, whom he later recognizes as his long dead brother, and then with others such as the shoe-store man, Larry

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Tedesco, who comes looking for his wife. Later Leonard and Rose, a young couple, also enter. Rose is expecting and the man with her is not the father of her child. In the fashion of absurdist plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where characters indulge in conversation that keeps spiraling, leading to nothing, characters in Miller's play keep arguing, competing, venting, and generally digressing. Language in *Mr. Peters' Connections* reflects the irrationality and amorphousness of life itself. Peters and other characters talk, yet none of them seems to be expressing themselves, and, as a result, meaningless dialogues comprised of repetition and absolute nothings carry on throughout the play.

Language thus mirrors the separation and isolation that Peters perpetually experiences in his life. Instead of being an effective means of communication, dialogue in this play only appears to be a means of killing time. Peters keeps wondering why exactly he is here and Calvin keeps reminding him that he came to the nightclub to wait for his wife. "IF SHE DOESN'T COME, DOES IT MEAN I CAN'T LEAVE?! WHERE IS MY POOR GOD-DAMNED WIFE!" (423), he exclaims, tired and frustrated. Peters's anxiety forces the audience to wonder about where exactly he wishes to go from the nightclub and exactly what brought him here. There seems to be absolutely no association between the questions asked and the answers given amongst characters of the play. Thus, Peters's query about the "subject" remains unanswered. At one point, he and Calvin indulge in a completely absurd conversation about shoes:

> PETERS. . . . I decided to buy shoes. I have very narrow feet.
> CALVIN. Not as narrow as mine, betcha—triple—A.
> PETERS. Quadruple—A. *Extending a foot.* Narrow as herrings—I said I'd meet her here.
> CALVIN. I used to take a quintuple—A but I don't have time to go running all over the city looking for them anymore. . . . I am busy!
> PETERS. Well I'm busy too . . .
> CALVIN. Not as busy as I am.
> PETERS. I assure you, I am just as busy as you are. I got these in that shoe store right on the corner. (404)

In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon's boots symbolize the struggles of daily life and his constant putting them on and pulling them off his attempts at killing time. Metaphorically, the "boots" suggest being grounded and attached to the base realities of life. This obsession with shoes in *Mr. Peters' Connections* draws

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attention to another of Miller's late plays, *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*, in which the image of shoes is an "integral part of the play's ending" (Singh 188). It reflects "stability, a comfortable support and footing" of Nurse Logan's family that the central character of the play, Lyman Felt, a bigamist, wants for himself at the end when he is abandoned by his two wives (188). In Peters's story, too, shoes appear to signify "the need for a stable ground under one's feet" (187). In Abbotson's view as well, shoes imply Peters's recognition of reality and being "grounded" despite the man's constant desire for flight (249). When his wife, Charlotte comes to see him, Peters says to her: "when I woke up this morning, I did not plan for shoes" (*CP* 429). It seems to imply that Peters is not really looking for "stability or life on earth" but only an end to this meaninglessness (Singh 188).

The title of the play underlines the importance of connections in human life, about which Jan Baars and Chris Phillipson argue that:

> Connections play a significant role in the constitution of meaning". Seeing connections and experiencing connectedness with other people, with specific regions, cultures, nations or even the world, is constitutive for the experience that our lives have meaning. However, during long lives connections may become unclear or problematic, and experiences of connectedness with "normal" adults may come under pressure because of ageist practices. (11)

When one's foundational people such as one's close group of family and friends are no longer around, older adults are bound to feel an acute sense of "bereavement" (de Beauvoir 443). Almost all the people Peters could once relate to are now long dead except for his wife. With the deaths of their family and friends, older adults suffer the "loss of a certain image of themselves," which they found only in and through those people (366). When they find nobody around them with whom they shared part of their childhood or youth—with whom they could simply sit and cherish those memories of the past, it pushes them to a kind of "existential dilemma." Peters's dead brother and his dead beloved are simply a reflection of his desire to connect to his past—to his identity. With no connections to bind life together, older adults are forced to look at death as a relatively more rewarding option (de Beauvoir 443). And even when the idea of death appears to be comforting, there remains a concurrent anxiety attached to its prospect, traumatizing the individual. Discussing "death anxiety" commonly experienced by older adults, Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason explain "future-related regret" as

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"an emotional response" to the recognition that the future years required for the attainment of planned goals are no longer accessible and this realization is accompanied by feelings of deep melancholy and discontent (348). In such a state of hopelessness, an ageist environment can prove to be even more unfavorable to one's sense of self—shrinking life to just waiting for the "end."

Gordon D. Jensen and Fredericka B. Oakley refer to ageism as a process consisting of "vicious cycles" (25). They assert that once a person is segregated in the "discriminated category," they are more likely to be avoided by younger people (25). Older adults are thus forced to stay constantly nostalgic for old times—given that they find nothing relatable in their experiences of today. This inability to experience connectedness is perhaps the worst aspect of growing old as it dilutes the very meaning of one's existence. A significant concern that Miller highlights is the enormous gap older adults feel when they converse with today's youngsters, whose "lingo" and content of talk they completely fail to understand. Peters's comment to Leonard, "I truly wonder whether the country could be saved if people could stay on the same subject for more than twenty seconds" (Miller, *CP* 428), highlights the frustration older adults experience in a world that jumps from subject to subject, without letting anyone have a relevant and substantial discussion on any one topic.

Another significant challenge faced by older adults that Miller highlights through Peters's situation is their problem with recollecting stories of the past, their moments of glory that can keep rekindling their desire to live. Even though people of all age groups need some amount of validation every now and then, in old age this need can be amplified, yet, sadly, in today's fast-moving world listeners can be hard to come by. The lack of interest of the youth in maintaining meaningful communication with older adults leads to an acute crisis in the lives of the latter as it does not let them have their chance at "life review," which facilitates "existential validation" (Falk and Falk 96). Tomer and Eliason also agree that "life review" is integral to one's sense of self as it fulfills "different functions at different stages of the life span" (354). The process of reminiscing about and reviewing life events and episodes can "foster the integration of past conflicts" and is therefore extremely essential for those who have lived most of their life span and are aware of their "time and place in the seasons of life" (353). In de Beauvoir's view, frequently turning to memories of the past can be viewed as older adults' mechanism to survive in their current situation—past those glorious times when they felt like "first class individuals" (435).

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"If you forget me—who . . . who the hell am I!" (Miller, *CP* 434), Peters says while searching for a "subject." His desperation to experience "connectedness" reflects his intense need to list and celebrate his life's achievements and the hurdles he crossed to come so far. Falk and Falk emphasize the importance of "life review" underlining older adults' need to feel they did not live "in vain," that they contributed to others and to their society—and that they indeed "made a difference" (96). To explain, they cite the example of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who feels an intense need to narrate the same story again and again (96). By catching hold of "willing and unwilling listeners," the Mariner reviews his life, thus alleviating his uncertainties and anxieties (96). Peters also appears to be looking for listeners who will appreciate the achievements of a sixteen-year-old who once washed airplanes yet still managed to learn to fly, marking as his greatest success to have served as a respectable Pan Am pilot for twenty-six years.

Exclusion galore: Alienating ageist practices in personal and public domains

Discussing growing old and the vulnerability of older adults in America, Elinor Langer contends that for American citizens this last phase of their lives is imaginably the "worst" (471). Various developments in medical science have controlled several life-threatening human diseases, because of which more men and women today live longer but the older adults of America are usually completely "bored and alienated" (471). The alienation experienced by older adults in America is a natural part of a culture where "old" is a "dirty word" (Falk and Falk 26). Yet, speaking strictly about parts of the world that are either western or westernizing, it is imperative to take note of the fact that ageism is not typically an American problem. In most modern nations, social antipathy towards senior generations has only increased in recent years, because instead of helping older adults defy their "biological fate," modern societies choose to chuck them aside—while they are still living, while they could still accomplish so much more in the years that remain (de Beauvoir 380).

In *Mr. Peters' Connections*, Miller touches upon the theme of alienation and feelings of worthlessness experienced by older adults as a result of prevalent ageism in various personal and public domains. He imperceptibly shows us how being above a certain age naturally means purposelessness in modern societies. The playwright sheds light on how ageism is a natural byproduct of socio-economic structures that render men and women mere numbers. Harry Peters has had a professionally productive life but now he

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feels acute worthlessness as he has no projects to pursue. He is expected to be "retired and resting" perennially until he is finally taken by death. The play focuses on how depression in old age can also be a consequence of this state of joblessness. de Beauvoir also argues how being completely bereft of "projects" can make older adults become so passive and aimless that they begin to look at death as "acceptable" (443); yet, the challenge lies in the fact that "death" by nature is tentative. "Death is neither near nor far: it *is* not" (442). Unfortunately, people usually fail to understand how one's "job," whether "drudgery" or a "source of interest," is an essential factor binding a person to the social environment, which is why being retired often gives one a feeling of "rejection" (263). Echoing this, Jensen and Oakley also claim that in "post-industrial societies" older adults are rendered useless and are often left to "suffer an irreparable loss of status and care" (22). They assert that the "human potential of the older person in America is not fully realized" (20) as they do not occupy "positions of value and are unable to exercise their skill and knowledge because of exclusion from participation in their previous roles" (21). Even though Peters's story offers a narrative about the situation of older Americans, yet it also reflects the state of all societies that are living in the aftermath of massive capitalism and industrialization, where people's value is determined essentially by their economic/material contribution.

Miller addresses the theme of how ageist practices at the workplace lead to resentment among older adults as they are often forced to retire according to the customary retirement age. Jensen and Oakley view "mandatory retirement" as one of the "most significant manifestations of ageism in America" (23). Peters's sense of low self-worth directly connects to his sense of purposelessness: the loss of his passion, the joy of flying planes. Like many other older adults of America, Peters does not know what to do with his time. Oftentimes, if not completely retired, older adults are forced to take up jobs that do not make full use of their potential and skills, as it happens with Mr. Peters. He has not been able to come to terms with how he was prematurely thrown out of a profession that he considered his "calling":

> CALVIN. Look, you're not flying anywhere, are you?
> PETERS, *sitting up*. Flying! They haven't let me into a cockpit for eighteen years! I had at least five years of flying left in me when they dumped me like a bag of shit! And the Democrats are no better! (*CP* 411)

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Peters was forced to take up the job of professor at Princeton; the frustration of ending up explaining to a class "which war you were in" is what he equates with talking "futility" (413). His bitterness pushes him to pinpoint "humiliation" as the "subject" of life (413). Although the exploitation of older adults in the labor force is a common practice in modern nations, it is especially so in purely profit-driven consumerist societies, where older employees are mainly seen as enemies of the younger workforce (de Beauvoir 225). When companies are downscaling, older adults are those most likely to be shunted off to the side and this rejection ends up taking a toll on both their personal and professional lives (Applewhite 150).

Since people's "biological" and "chronological" ages do not always coincide, fixing the same age of retirement for every worker is conceivably the most unfair workplace policy practiced across the world (de Beauvoir 263). In fact, one's "chronological age is an increasingly unreliable benchmark of pretty much anything about a person" (Applewhite 47). Miller's play emphasizes how it is not only the lack of professional representation that adversely affects older adults' lives but also feelings of exclusion and otherness experienced in every other public and personal sphere. The signboard that constantly reminds us that "youth is valued" is hard to overlook (Kite and Wagner 129). Whether it is interpersonal social communication or finding representation in mainstream media, older adults just seem to be experiencing estrangement at every possible level. For instance, each time only young bodies are showcased as desirable, it gives older adults another reason to feel sorry for themselves. Ironically, in times when every other cosmetic procedure is aimed at replenishment and retention of youth, we expect older adults to feel comfortable in their own "skin." Conspicuously, "social gerontophobia" is so widespread that older adults are often forced to "temporarily" escape the "penalties imposed for old age" by way of cosmetic surgery and other such treatments (Falk and Falk 7). Peters is traumatized encountering this trend of body-worshipping. It is difficult for him to accept a world where people spend large sums of money on cosmetic procedures such as "breast augmentation," money that looks big enough to have bought a house in the old times (*CP* 414).

Along with pinpointing the trend of body worshipping, Miller throws light on how health and basic living have been made such complicated issues in today's world. A bizarre conversation about the importance of eating bananas highlights the same:

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ROSE. Maybe you're low on potassium. You should eat bananas. . . . You only have enough bananas when one more would make you want to throw up. I know about such things, I'm a dancer, dancers need trace elements for the knees.

PETERS, *nods with a certain alarm*. Trace elements for the knees? You see, this is what I mean; when I was young no human being from one end of the United States to the other would have uttered that sentence. For example, my father and grandfather—I don't recall them ever in the presence of a banana. And they lived into their nineties. (*CP* 418)[3]

The obsession with finding one's panacea against aging does not stop here; from attaching excessive value to "trace elements" to buying anti-aging lotions and potions for a wrinkle-free face, it travels to the fields of medical science and surgery. Selling people "the dream of eternal youth" is the most lucrative business of the pharmaceutical industry (Falk and Falk 40). It is money-spinning because while "our ageist society pathologizes natural transitions," its capitalist forces try to loot us by offering us medicines and therapies to "fix" them (Applewhite 74).

The character of Harry Peters embodies the sense of disgust men and women feel with their own bodies because of an environment that promotes "anti-aging." It also conveys how older adults are also often shamed into being "asexual."[4] In de Beauvoir's words, "disgust at one's own body takes various forms among men and women; but in neither, age may provoke it, and if this happens they will refuse to make their body exist for another" (320). For most older men and women, suppressing sexual needs and desires appears to be a better option than coming across as "a lecherous old man" or "a shameless old woman" (320). Cathy May, Peters's dead beloved, keeps appearing and disappearing in the play and is often seen as a representation of Miller's second wife, Marilyn Monroe.[5] In her first appearance, Peters sees her nude, only wearing a pair of heels. It can be viewed as symbolic of his unconscious desires—both sexual and emotional. Cathy's glamorous, nude image fills Peters with excitement, sadness, and guilt. He is ashamed of himself, his body, and his desire for anything that is sexual by nature:

PETERS. An old man talking about a . . . a woman's powder room—?— it's obscene! Look at the veins in the back of my hands?—shall these warped fingers stroke a breast, cup an ass . . .? And you call life fair? No . . . no-no . . . *Fumbling*. Why don't I just sit here acting my age, quietly reading my

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> paper till my wife comes? Tell you the truth, I've just had lunch and it makes me drowsy . . . (407)

Sadly, "sex among the old is a laughing matter in America" and since both religious groups and people in general are so averse to the idea of sex in old age, there is a "very high degree of gerontophobia in this area" (Falk and Falk 127). Applewhite also opines that "nowhere is ageism more sexist, and vicious, than in the domain of sexuality," which is perhaps why most Americans believe that sex is the business of the young and older adults are not sexually active (122). Even though "the right to intimacy is lifelong," older adults are constantly denied their rights (Applewhite 123). Everywhere around us, we only see younger bodies being portrayed as the ideal sexual beings; "examples of older people, let alone sexually active ones, are few and far between" (124).

This brutal exclusion from mainstream representation forces older adults to feel guilty for their sexual desires, which is Peters's feeling too. His rebuke to himself "why don't I just sit here acting my age" (*CP* 407) reflects how older adults are trained to feel incapable. The caution "act your age" that means fulfilling "expectations of industry, gravity, and the acceptance of responsibility" for young children has a completely "burdensome connotation" for older adults (Golub et al. 278). It is chiefly based on the assumption that older adults are just like children, who need to be told and continually reminded of how they should act. This expectation that older adults must "act like old people" can often become "oppressive" as it proposes that one's individual behavior, irrespective of how one actually feels, must be "determined by a chronology over which the individual has no control" (278). Peters's age-reminders to himself express his surrender of "a degree of agency, responsibility, and control" over his own body and mind (278).

An unexpected finale: When the "subject" meets Peters

About the ambiguous nature of Miller's late plays (with special reference to his double-bill, *Two Way Mirror*), Christopher Bigsby highlights how Miller's writing career that began with "certainties," in which "character and plot were means to an end," and "agencies of social, political, economic circumstance," turned into a different direction later (360). His drama opened up to the realms of "ambiguity," where he appeared captivated by "means by which we invent not only ourselves but others, by a past that is not fixed in time and space but invoked by need and deformed by memory" (360). *Mr.*

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Peters' Connections is conceivably a prime example of this acceptance of vagueness of life and the playwright's fascination with the human potential to rebuild the past as per need and circumstance. The audience is constantly left to do the guessing game as this former pilot finds himself in a cryptic time and place and tries to reconnect with his past—fiddling with many questions. In his "narcoticized twilight state between semi-wakefulness and a presumably eternal sleep" (Brantley), Harry Peters plunges through his memoirs, giving us but debris of an era and a life gone by. Though vague and distorted, his memories take us through his life's journey. There are moments in the play when it gets difficult to even conclude if Peters is actually reliving these memories or simply constructing them. He appears to be bringing all his experiences of different times together to give himself and his life some kind of coherence, some meaning—some substantial "subject." Reflecting on the character of Mr. Peters, Miller said in an interview: "it's tough to be near death and have to think that there's no definition to your life" (Bigsby 405), which sums up the main challenge of growing old and becoming aware of approaching death. Like the dilapidated nightclub, Peters's life has also seen many transitions to reach this state. There is regret related to past love, unfulfilled dreams and promises along with desperation to connect once more, and the ensuing frustration about how he cannot. He has lived a life full of varied experiences and yet the "subject" remains blurred.

In Miller's theatrical oeuvre, *Mr. Peters' Connections* can scarcely be viewed as a play "well-made," which is exactly what the playwright pinpoints about the nature of human life. It is the randomness of life that is reflected also in the way the play ends. The drama that began with confusion leaves us in a state of absolute ambiguity. Placing the ending of *Mr. Peters' Connections* alongside those in some of Miller's other late plays such as *Broken Glass*, *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*, *The Last Yankee*, and *Resurrection Blues*, Miller's emphasis on ambiguity and hope becomes quite clear. All of these plays reinstate the playwright's belief in establishing connection, in accepting life with its myriad uncertainties, in finding hope despite disarray and seeming defeat. Throughout *Mr. Peters' Connections*, we see characters digress, forget names and events, and talk endlessly in spirals about mundane things such as bananas, mahogany toilets, laundry methods, and vacuum cleaners. In the midst of this zigzag of many voices, Peters keeps struggling with his search for the "subject." He does not give up and towards the end he urges all other characters around him at the nightclub to think of the "subject":

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PETERS. Rest now. All rest. Quietly, please. Quietly rest. While we think of the subject. While breath comes blessedly clear. While we learn to be brave.

(ROSE *and* LEONARD *sit on either side of* PETERS. *Farther upstage, frozen in time, Larry is looking into the empty shopping bag,* CHARLOTTE *is working her calculator,* CALVIN *is staring into space,* ADELE *is examining her face in the mirror . . .*) (*CP* 436)

In the midst of this last scene, to the surprise of both Peters and the audience, Rose suddenly calls him "Papa":

ROSE. Papa?
PETERS (*opens his eyes, listens*). Yes?
ROSE. Please stay.
PETERS (*straight ahead*). I'm trying!
ROSE. I love you, Papa.
PETERS. I'm trying as hard as I can. I love you, darling. I wonder . . . could that be the subject! (436)

Whether Rose is actually Peters's daughter or someone who finds him a father-like figure remains uncertain but what emerges as crystal clear is that the "subject" Mr. Peters was looking for is "love" (Abbotson 249). In Bigsby's view, in his "dream world," Peters encounters his daughter Rose also as a perfect stranger because at this stage in his life, even she is a "representative of a younger generation, more evidence of a broken continuity than anything else, though it is continuity he seeks." (412). Nonetheless, in his association with Charlotte and Rose, Peters is finally able to find a "connection." The play ends with Mrs. Charlotte Peters planning to renovate the ramshackle nightclub into something new and innovative, which can be interpreted to be symbolically suggesting how life can always be refashioned despite much wear and tear. With Rose being pregnant and the warmth of family unity felt at the end of the play, the audience is left with both anticipation and uncertainty. Miller's play thus exemplifies how the human pursuit for meaning is meant to prevail despite anxieties related to death. In being connected Mr. Peters finally comes to find his purpose to stay. Thus, with its own innate serendipitous movement, with a narration that refuses to directly tell us whether it is Peters's "contemplation of life itself" or a "confrontation with death" or both (Bigsby 406), *Mr. Peters' Connections* explicitly validates how "a pattern can be born in the formlessness of life that

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reveals no inherent order or purpose" (Centola, "Chaos" 28). It also authenticates how "change" that naturally accompanies the process of aging does not necessarily mean "decay." Harry Peters's story highlights connectedness and love as essential to battle against all modern-day evils, whether that is "ageism" or any other–ism for that matter.

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Notes

[1] Hereinafter referred to as *CP*.

[2] One of the two one-act plays from *Danger: Memory* features Leo and Leonora, two older adults who have been lifelong friends to each other. The main action of this play comprises only their conversation that takes place in Leo's "*living-room kitchen in a nondescript wooden house on a country backroad*" (Miller, *CP* 3).

[3] The obsession with bananas naturally draws attention to Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, which features an aging character reliving his past through a diary tape. Beckett shows him eating bananas and uses the banana motif throughout the play. The presence of bananas in the play has been interpreted variously, but prominent among the varied interpretations is the reference to Krapp's desire for phallic pleasures, his overindulgence in bodily needs. In fact, the primary theme of *Krapp's Last Tape* is that of living in the shadow of past regret and unfulfilled goals set for oneself in youth, which can hamper one's emotional balance in old age. The conversation about bananas in *Mr. Peters' Connections* can also be interpreted as pointing at the overindulgence and excessiveness of modern youth, which takes Peters by shock.

[4] Little is written about Miller's connection with Agnes Barley, an abstract painter he forged a close relationship with after his third wife, Inge Morath, passed away. Their brief affair before Miller's death attained controversial status as Agnes was fifty-five years Miller's junior. A particular article published in *The Telegraph* referred to their relationship as "not sexual" but "very intense" (Leonard). Relationships that involve only younger people are seldom scrutinized in the same way.

[5] Cathy is also often compared to the Monroe figures in Miller's other plays: Maggie in *After the Fall* and Kitty in *Finishing the Picture*.

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