That Championship Season Study Guide

That Championship Season by Jason Miller

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Contents

That Championship Season Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....4

Author Biography....5

Plot Summary....7

Act 1....10

Act 2....17

Act 3....21

Characters....24

Themes....26

Style....28

Historical Context....30

Critical Overview....31

Criticism....33

Critical Essay #1....34

Critical Essay #2....38

Critical Essay #3....43

Critical Essay #4....48

Adaptations....57

Topics for Further Study....58

Compare and Contrast....59

What Do I Read Next?....60

Further Study....61

Bibliography....62

Copyright Information....63

Introduction

Jason Miller's *That Championship Season* was regarded as one of the more important plays of its time. In addition to reflecting the emptiness of America's emphasis on winning and other suspect values, the play was also regarded as the kind of quintessential American drama Broadway should have been producing, but was not. *That Championship Season* made its debut off-Broadway at the Estelle Newman/Public Theatre on May 2, 1972, where it ran for 144 performances. The production was then moved to the Booth Theatre on Broadway, where it ran for an additional 844 performances. The play ran for a total of 988 performances before it closed on April 21, 1974.

That Championship Season was only the second full-length play Miller had written, and it was by far his most successful. Miller was primarily an actor, who wrote plays on the side. For this play, which lifted him out of obscurity, Miller won numerous awards, including the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Play, Drama Desk Award for Most Promising Playwright, and Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Playwriting Award, all in 1972. Miller also won the Antoinette Perry Award (the Tony) for best play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1973. In the early 1980s, he later adapted the play into a movie, which he directed.

From its earliest productions, *That Championship Season* was widely praised by critics, though a few dissenters had problems with certain aspects of the play. Those who like the play compliment its humor, dialogue, and characters. Reviewing the Broadway production, Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* writes, "Mr. Miller has a perfect ear and instinct for the rough and tumble profanity of locker-room humor. The coarsely elegant gibes go along with Mr. Miller's indictment of a society, which opens with an ironic playing of the National Anthem and then lacerates the sickness of small-town America full of bigotry, double-dealing, racism and hate."

Author Biography

Jason Miller was born on April 22, 1939, in Long Island City, New York. He was the only child of John and Mary Claire Miller, an electrician and a teacher respectively. The family moved to Pennsylvania when Miller was very young and he spent the rest of his childhood there. As a child, Miller was unfocused. He loved to play sports but often got into trouble at the Catholic schools he attended. A nun encouraged him to learn to use his powerful voice. She got him involved in elocution (public speaking) competitions, which soon compelled Miller to pursue a career in acting.

After graduating from Saint Patrick's High School in Scranton, Pennsylvania, he enrolled at the University of Scranton. He studied theater and playwriting, earning his B. A. in 1961. In 1962, Miller entered the Catholic University of America for a year of graduate training in acting. There he met and married Linda Gleason, the daughter of actor/comedian Jackie Gleason. The couple eventually had three children (including Jason Patric Miller who became an accomplished actor in his own right as Jason Patric). Both Miller and his wife became professional actors, traveling to wherever they could find work on the stage.

By the mid-1960s, Miller and his family settled in New York City. Though he appeared in soap operas and regional productions, he also held jobs as a truck driver and a welfare caseworker when necessary to support his family. Miller made his New York acting debut in 1969 in *Pequod*, an off-Broadway play. He also dabbled in playwriting. One of his plays was *Nobody Hears a Broken Drum* (1970).

In the early 1970s, he began writing the play that became *That Championship Season*. Though producers initially rejected the play, it attracted the attention of Joseph Papp. With Papp's help, the play was produced off-Broadway in the spring of 1972. By fall, it had moved to Broadway.

Miller did not write another play that was produced for many years. Instead, he went to Hollywood and focused primarily on acting. In 1973, he played the role of Father Karras in the horror film *The Exorcist*. The role earned him an Academy Award nomination. Miller also appeared in television roles including *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood* (1976). Miller did not leave writing entirely behind. He wrote for television and films, beginning in the early 1980s.

Since the initial productions of *That Championship Season*, Miller spent many years trying to get the play made into a feature film. In 1982, his dream was finally realized. Miller wrote the adaptation, and when there were problems finding a director, he directed the production as well. The resulting film was not a commercial success.

By the mid-1980s, Miller left Hollywood to return home to Scranton. While taking care of his ill parents, Miller became the artistic director of the Scranton Public Theatre. In 1997, Miller returned to playwriting with *Barrymore's Ghost*, which was first produced in Seattle. Miller played the lead in its first production when the star dropped out. However,

most of Miller's professional energies remain focused on acting and writing for television.

Plot Summary

Act 1

That Championship Season opens in Coach's decaying living room. He is hosting a reunion of the high school basketball team he coached to a championship about twenty years ago. Tom Daley and George Sikowski are in the room, catching up. Tom has come from out of town for the reunion, while George is now the hometown mayor. Tom drinks heavily.

George worries about his upcoming reelection campaign, and derides his opponent, Norman Sharmen. They talk about the Coach, who recently had an operation. George believes that he owes his mayorship to the Coach's influence. The pair wishes that Martin would have come to the reunion. Martin was the best player among them, but he has never returned.

George tells Tom that Phil Romano, one of their teammates and a rich businessman, will be contributing a big sum to his campaign in return for a favorable land lease. James Daley (Tom's elder brother), Phil, and Coach finally return with food and drink. Coach is happy to see all of them.

The Coach equates their team effort to get George elected with their winning the championship. The Coach tells all of them how proud he is of their accomplishments. James tells the Coach that he helped them succeed. The conversation turns to the current lack of respect in the country. When Tom leaves to use the bathroom, those who remain discuss his alcoholic state. While the Coach wants to put Tom to work on George's campaign, James informs them that his brother is leaving town.

Phil tells George that he might not be easily reelected. Among other things, George has raised taxes, and some local plants will be closing soon. James defends George. George cannot see that he has failed in some areas, including the purchase of an elephant for the local zoo that died ten days later, and that he might not be able to win again. George is defensive.

Coach finds it hard to tolerate the dissension in the room. He derides it as well as the dissension that has been growing in the United States. As Coach grows more agitated, he suffers severe pain related to his recent surgery. George helps him upstairs.

When the pair is gone, Phil tells James and Tom that George has no chance to be reelected. James asks Phil if he does not support George because Phil is having an affair with George's wife, Marion. James threatens to reveal this, reminding Phil that his business will be destroyed if George is not reelected. Phil tells James that he might contribute to the campaign of George's opponent, Sharmen. Because Phil does not believe George has what it takes to become mayor, James offers himself up as an

alternate candidate. James has political aspirations of his own. Phil belittles James's idea.

James informs George that Phil might not support his campaign. George has an important piece of information on Sharmen. Sharmen's uncle was a communist in the 1950s. Phil does not believe it will change anything. Phil reminds them that his money got George elected in the first place. James insists that his campaign work was just as important as the money, and he tells George that Phil has been sleeping with his wife. Phil admits that they had a fling. George takes a rifle from the wall and points it at Phil.

Act 2

Coach gets George to give him the gun and calms him down. He learns about the affair and yells at Phil. When pressed by Coach, Phil tells the story of the incident. Coach is stunned, but tells the men that they must stick together. George does not want anything to do with Phil. He believes that Phil took advantage of his wife when she was vulnerable.

While the Coach admits that he had his liaisons, he believes his boys, these men, are the real trophies from his life. He tries to inspire them to stick together. Phil tells him that he cannot support George.

George exits to use the bathroom. Coach goes on about how Sharmen's uncle was a communist. Tom questions why he must use the communism aspect at all. Coach believes that one must exploit an opponent's weakness to win whether it's a game or an election. Tom leaves to use the bathroom when George returns. James dares Phil to call Sharmen and offer him a campaign contribution now. Phil does, but Sharmen turns him down.

Phil becomes angry with them for using him. As Coach continues to try to convince him to support George, Tom returns, but drunkenly falls down the stairs. He is unhurt. Phil asks Coach to talk outside for a moment. George is worried about their conversation. He becomes upset about his wife's infidelity and other family matters. James tries to convince George to accept Phil's money, if Coach can change Phil's mind. George asks James if he would take the money, if Phil was having an affair with James's wife. James says yes.

Tom and James begin to argue. George feels sorry for himself. James tries to convince George that Marion might have had the affair for his benefit. James becomes upset about his life, and the sacrifices he made to support his father, his alcoholic brother, and his family.

Phil comes back in, and tells George that Coach wants to see him on the porch. Phil talks about how bored he is in his life and how his crowning moment was the championship they won. He talks about the affair, telling Tom that George's wife has been sleeping with other men for several years. Phil also reveals that his wife sleeps around with his consent.

Phil tells them that he wants to hire professional outside people to run George's campaign. This means James will step down as his manager. James is upset because of his own political aspirations. Phil slugs James, breaking his dentures. James vows revenge—by defaming George—if they dump him. George becomes sick and throws up in their championship trophy.

Act 3

Coach takes George upstairs to clean up, while James leaves to wipe out the trophy. Phil tells Tom more details about the affair. James returns, still angry about their betrayal. James wants his turn now. Coach comes back. He is still upset by the dissension. James tells him that he wants to be respected, but Coach calls him a whiner.

George returns. He has talked to his wife, and she admitted that she had the affair in return for the campaign money. Coach tells George to go home and beat up his wife for her infidelity. He believes George has no pride. Though the men have talent, Coach believes they are wasting it. James still wants to be campaign manager, but no one will listen.

When Tom speaks up, Coach calls him useless. Tom tells him why Martin has not come back in twenty years. Martin had wanted him to refuse the championship trophy because Coach had told him to seriously hurt the best player on the opposing team during the game. Martin complied, breaking the boy's ribs. Coach denies the whole matter, though Tom tries to needle him into admitting it. Coach hits Tom. Tom leaves.

Coach talks about his past, his mother and father, and how he made those present winners. He puts on a recording of the last moments of the championship game. Tom returns. The men make up. James agrees to do what George wants, though he will still work on the campaign. They take a picture of the four men and an individual one of the Coach.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Act 1 takes place in the living room of the Coach. The room is furnished with old, dusty furniture that has definitely seen better days. The rest of the room is likewise dusty with the carpet and curtains looking as though they haven't been cleaned in years. Along the walls are gun racks that contain several shotguns. There is an air of nostalgia in the room that is brought on by the presence of several trophies that adorn the top of a bookshelf as well as the large silver trophy that sits on the dining room table. There are also photographs of several political icons of past years, including Teddy Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Tom Daley is in the room examining one of the guns while George Sikowski mixes drinks in the adjacent kitchen. Taking one of the guns from the rack, Tom asks George if he knows the guns are loaded. As Tom returns the gun to the rack, George enters with his drink and comments how much he has missed him and noting that Tom has not attended the last three reunions. He continues by saying that winning the championship is, by far, the accomplishment of which he is most proud; even being mayor of the town did not mean as much to him as winning the championship does.

The two men spend a few moments discussing their glory days before wondering what has delayed the rest of their friends. The conversation then turns to George's political career and he tells Tom that the pressures of the job are sometimes too much. He is about to begin a re-election campaign against a Jewish opponent. As the consider this, Tom asks George if he is ready for another drink. George warns Tom that his brother James will be mad if he arrives and finds Tom drunk. George tells Tom that he intends to appoint James as the superintendent of schools after the election.

Tom then asks George about the outcome of the Coach's stomach surgery. George tells him that the doctor suspects it is nothing more than an ulcerated stomach. George says that he suspects that the coach will live forever, and he will always be grateful to him for standing behind him when he began his political career. Reminiscing about his first campaign, George recalls that he won by a mere thirty-two votes.

As the two men engage in further small talk, Tom pours himself another drink, which prompts George to ask him if he has a drinking problem. Tom assures him that he does not, that his increasing forgetfulness and loss of weight are merely the result of his advancing age. Tom then tells George that he saw a woman whom they sexually took advantage of when they were freshmen. George asks Tom to not discuss that incident because if word gets out that he was involved in that, he would be ruined politically. He goes on to tell Tom that the woman was raped two years ago.

In an attempt to change the subject, George again wonders what is keeping the rest of their friends. He suspects that the coach is taking the opportunity to drive one of Phil

Romano's cars. Phil has a tendency to drive fast and George says he has to cancel at least five speeding tickets each month for him. In addition to this, he is dating an eighteen year-old girl from Scranton. He tells Tom that Phil has become increasingly moody in recent years, but he is trying to tolerate him because Phil has promised to contribute $30,000 towards his upcoming campaign in return for being able to keep some former strip mines that he has been leasing from the city. George's justification for this decision lies in the fact that his opponent is using ecological issues as part of his campaign platform and wishes to break this lease. As they discuss this, Phil Romano and James Daley enter carrying buckets of fried chicken and some beer. The coach is still outside, parking the car.

As George and Phil go into the kitchen to put the chicken in the oven, James asks Tom to try his best to remain sober. Tom assures him that he will. When George returns to the room, James tells him that Phil evaded "the subject" completely. George begins to question him, but stops when Phil enters the room. The four men spend a few minutes joking about Phil's collection of pornographic films before being interrupted by a loud whistle from the front porch. The coach enters, and in a voice and style reminiscent of their high school glory days, he implores his former players to take some laps around the room before toasting them as the 1952 Pennsylvania State High School Basketball Champions.

When George tells Coach that they owe all of their success to him, he replies that he has always thought of this team as being similar to a fine watch that keeps perfect time. He cautions the men to make sure they keep in shape since they are now approaching the period of their lives when they will be most susceptible to succumbing to a heart attack. George mentions that he has recently purchased an exercise bicycle to which Phil makes a disparaging comment. This causes Coach to point out that Phil is working on his third chin and that James looks exceptionally tired. James replies that he hasn't been sleeping particularly well lately, due in part, to the fact that he recently had his teeth removed and now uses dentures. When Coach comments that he probably should have had more Vitamin C in his diet, James responds that he had recently read a study in which tooth loss was attributed to nerves. Coach tells James to relax and have another drink. He then hugs Tom and tells him how happy he is to see him again.

Feeling nostalgic, Coach recalls the final ten seconds of the last game this team played together. Soon, the other men are drawn in, and amazingly, each can recall exactly where they were and what role they played during those final seconds. After reliving the final game-winning shot, Coach reminds them how they overcame the odds to beat a team from a school three-times bigger than their own. Then, he somberly recalls Martin, the key player in that final play. Martin is not with them for this reunion, in fact, no one has heard from him for twenty years. Coach suggests that they take a moment to say a prayer for Martin's safety and happiness. The men join their hands in silent prayer and then Coach reminds them that they never had a losing season.

In an effort to turn the conversation back to politics, George says that after the election, his opponent, Sharmen, won't be able to say the same thing. Coach agrees and says that not only will George win; they will drive Sharmen out of politics in return for his

attempts to put Phil out of his strip-mining business. George tells the group that Sharmen recently made a personal attack against him in the local press by saying that during his term, the town has regressed rather than progressed. Coach assures George that he will win the election and give the town four more wonderful years. He then tells the others that he is proud of the success each of them has achieved over the years. When James suggests that Coach is responsible for their success, he disagrees, saying that they each did it on their own.

Coach mentions to Phil that he noticed that his Little League team has recently lost their third game in a row. When Phil mentions that he recently lost two of his best players, James suggests using his son. Phil replies that young James can't hit a curveball, and believes that the boy isn't all that interested in baseball. James replies that the boy's lack of interest is the direct result of spending most of every game on the bench. When Phil again says that he doesn't believe the boy is all that interested, Tom interjects that young James told him that he doesn't enjoy baseball and would prefer not to play. When James responds that he thinks his son is going through a difficult time, Coach suggests that he try to keep his son interested in the game as a way of building character. James says that his son is a good respectful boy, and Coach agrees, saying that he is just like James and recalls how James took care of his own father. James replies," Someone had to do it."

The conversation again turns toward George's impending campaign. He tells the others that the high school newspaper recently published a picture of a pig with Phil's name beneath it, calling him a threat to the environment. George tells the others that he called the school's principal to complain, which inspires Tom to come up with a humorous campaign slogan for George. Tom then leaves to use the bathroom, and when he does, James mentions that he has been sick recently and that his illness has affected his memory. Coach thinks that Tom would be a tremendous asset to George's campaign as a speech-writer, but James says that he has already bought his plane ticket for the return trip home. When Coach says he will try to get him to change his mind, Phil suggests that the campaign may be in trouble and that Tom's help would be beneficial. George seems surprised to hear this, and tries to dispute Phil's statement. Coach suggests that they let Phil talk.

Phil tells George that the four percent property tax increase that he approved did not go over very well with the town's residents. Further, there is no work, and the outlook is only getting worse with the impending closure of the ammunition plant. George disputes Phil's claims, saying that the city was broke when he took office and he needed to raise taxes in order to get the city out of debt. As for unemployment, George says according to the statistics he was provided, the town's unemployment rate is actually below average. Phil replies that he heard Sharmen has already gotten an agreement from IBM to come to the town and that will bring many new jobs. Coach expresses his opinion that bringing large companies, such as IBM, to town will cause the population's demographics to change.

George maintains his position that he is a popular mayor, and reminds Phil that over 5000 people recently came out to cheer in the rain at the opening of the town's zoo. Phil

tells George that the people came to see the elephant that George arranged to live in the zoo, and reminded him that the elephant lived for only one month. They then recall the debacle that occurred in the days following the elephant's death, including the fact that it cost the city $500 to bury its remains.

George goes on to point out that during his term as mayor, they have been no riots and relatively little crime - only one rape in four years. Sensing that things are about to spiral out of control, Coach tells the men that he senses dissension in the room. He goes on to discuss various points in history in which dissension caused tragedy such as the murders of John F. Kennedy and Joe McCarthy. He reminds the men that they are currently living in dangerous times and that more than ever, it is important that they stick together. The mood lightens and as the men begin to sing, Coach becomes frozen in pain.

The men all gather around him and ask what is wrong. Coach tells them that he thinks his surgical incision is still healing and that he needs to go upstairs to put on a special girdle the doctor had given him. George helps him upstairs while the others remain in the living room.

When George and Coach are upstairs, Phil remarks how he believes that George is going to lose the election. When James questions why he is being so negative, Phil replies that the last election was very close, and that George was lucky to win. James asks if there is another reason - such as the fact that he is having an affair with George's wife. Phil tries to deny this, but finds he is unable to do so. James reminds Phil that George is the only thing that is preventing his business from totally failing. Phil tells James that he is well aware of that, but also implies that Sharmen can also benefit from his contributions. He justifies his actions by telling the others that a campaign contribution is not significantly different from any other financial investment, and that George is not worth the investment. James replies that if that is the case, then with Phil's endorsement and financial support, he will run for mayor.

The two men debate the campaign for a few minutes until George returns to the room. They toss around a basketball for a few moments, but Tom says that it doesn't feel right without Martin. George agrees, but says he believes that with practice, they could return to their old form. He asks James to share his campaign slogan with the rest of the group. Clearly uncomfortable, James tries to change the subject, but George persists. James eventually tells George that Phil has doubts that they will win the election. George tells them that he is confident he will win, particularly since he has recently learned that Sharmen's uncle was once a member of the Communist Party. When Phil says that he doesn't see this as an issue for Sharmen, James reminds him that George has been a good friend to him. Phil replies that he has more than repaid George by financing his campaigns. This causes James to explode, and he tells the others that the reason that Phil won't support George's campaign is because he is having an affair with George's wife, Marion. Upon hearing this, George takes one of the guns from the rack and , he points the gun at Phil and threatens to kill him.

Act 1 Analysis

The first few minutes of Act 1 are devoted to setting the stage and acquainting us with the principal characters. The entire play takes place in the living room of Coach's house in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The reference to a trip to Old Forge for Schlitz beer implies that Coach's house is on the west side of the city. It is 1972, and the five men that comprise the cast of this play are gathered to commemorate the 20th anniversary of their state basketball championship.

While the events that occur in this play could have taken place in any living room anywhere in this country, much of what happens in this play is a direct result of the Scranton setting. Scranton, Pennsylvania has long been characterized as a hardscrabble, mining town where people are passionate about three things: religion, politics and sports. Because a great number of the city's residents are descendents of Irish immigrants, Roman Catholicism is the prevailing religion. Although Scranton enjoyed a great deal of prosperity in the early 1900's, the countries decreasing reliance on coal as a source of energy resulted in a gradual decline in population. By the 1970s, the period of time in which the events in this play take place, all that is left to remind residents of Scranton's glory days are empty stores, abandoned coal-mines and a soaring unemployment rate.

Interestingly, Scranton's decline began in the early 1950's - right around the time the team won their championship. In many ways, this championship represents the pinnacle in the lives of George, Tom, James, Phil and even Coach. As we begin to learn more about these characters and the events that have taken place in their lives during the 20 years that have passed since winning the championship, we begin to see similarities between them and the fate of the city in which they grew up and now live.

The first characters we meet are George and Tom. George is the incumbent mayor of the town, and is about to launch his re-election campaign. When we first meet George, we are given the impression that he is confident and well respected. He uses phrases such as, "He can't touch me in this town," and "I am going to whip Sharmen's ass all over this town.". It doesn't take long, however, for us to see that George isn't nearly as confident as he appears. The first hint comes fairly early in the play, when he tells Tom that he won his first election by a mere thirty-two votes. He keeps finding ways to steer the conversation back to the topic of his campaign indicating that he is need of positive reinforcement. We also learn that he and his wife have recently experienced a deep personal loss.. The most telling indication that George isn't a strong candidate comes when Phil expresses doubts about George's chances for success. Rather than defend himself George turns to Coach for assurance. It is only when Coach doesn't readily defend him that George tries to justify his actions as mayor. When Phil confesses to his affair with Marion, George's initial response isn't that Marion is his wife, but that he is the mayor. It is clear that George finds his personal identity as being the mayor of Scranton rather than as Marion's husband.

In contrast to George, Tom seems to have spent a good portion of the last twenty years drunk. We learn quite early that Tom has a significant drinking problem with George's reference that James is going to be mad if he arrives and finds Tom drunk.. As Act 1 unfolds, James makes several more references to Tom's drinking problem, including the fact that he recently has been hospitalized as a result of it. Aside from the tragedy of Tom's alcoholism, he provides plenty of comic relief in what is an otherwise dramatic and tense play. It seems as though each time tensions rise, Tom manages to come up with a one-line quip or barb that serves to either ease the tension or cause tempers to flare.

Tom's brother, James, seems to carry the weight of everyone's problems with him. We learn that he spent a great deal of time and money caring for his elderly father - something he apparently resents. He also feels responsible for Tom, and tells Phil that he is financially supporting his brother. Despite his concern for his brother, he brings him to a party where drinking is both encouraged and expected. It seems as though James' actions are influenced by a sense of duty, rather than by wanting to do the right thing. Up to this point, he has ridden George's coattails. Even though he is assured a political appointment should George win the election, he is clearly dissatisfied with what he has accomplished, and desperately wants to see if he can reach his political potential. In fact, it is accurate to say that James' reference to his son's lack of self-esteem is as much about himself as it is about his son. His announcement that he intends to run for mayor is his way of trying to prove that he has not been left behind.

In Phil, we have a character that differs from the others in that he has become a successful businessman. While the others think that Phil provides financial support out of loyalty, Phil believes that his friends are using him for his money. Since we don't know much about Phil, it is safe to say that he does not trust easily. Instead of emotionally investing in a relationship, he chooses to have a long line of casual relationships. Although he is married, we learn later that he and his wife have an "understanding". Phil's announcement that he is considering providing financial support to Sharmen is not made because he believes that Sharmen is the better candidate, but rather because he knows that George may lose the election and in the process, ruin his own business. Phil's willingness to sacrifice his friendship with George in order to save his business provides us with one of our first indications that perhaps the bond between the men is based on a false premise. This becomes even more obvious as Act 1 ends with George pointing a loaded shotgun at Phil.

Martin, the missing teammate, is the only one that seems to be shrouded in some type of mystery. His disappearance and lack of contact over twenty years is indicative of some sort of controversy, however, few clues are provided up to this point.

Finally Coach, the character that brings these men together, seems to be stuck in the glory days. Based on the description offered of his home, it is clear that he has not made any effort to adapt to current styles.His insistence at invoking "the old days" each time the discussion gets heated, tells us that winning this championship is the single most important thing that has ever happened to him. Even though it has been twenty

years since he has been their coach, he acts as though he still has authority and influence over them.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

As this scene opens, the confrontation between George and Phil resumes. James, Coach and Tom try to convince George to put the gun back on the rack. Eventually, he relents, retreats to the couch and begins to cry. Coach tells one of the other men to bring George a drink, and then he sits beside him and tries to get him to calm down. When George finally composes himself, Coach asks what happened. George replies that the matter is private, an answer that Coach refuses to accept.

James attempts to tell Coach about Phil's affair with Marion.. When George finally tells Coach about the affair, he is shocked. He berates Phil and tells him how disappointed he is in him. Meanwhile, George asks Phil if his wife is good in bed. Coach asks Phil to tell him how the affair started. Phil tells that it began one day during the previous month when Marion came to his office to ask for a campaign contribution. When Coach asks for some details, George is appalled, but Coach tells him he is asking so as to find out who made the first move.

When Phil finishes telling his story, Coach reminds them it is important that the men remain together - that they need each other. George says he cannot be expected to remain friends with a man who seduced his wife. Coach ignores him. He tells the men he knows that he made it through his recent surgery because he knew he had their support. George tells Coach that his situation is different; he believes that Phil took advantage of Marion's delicate emotional condition - a condition that has persisted since the couple had to institutionalize their baby. He goes on to say that his job in the insurance business presented many opportunities for affairs with other women, but he chose to remain faithful.

Coach interrupts George and tells the men that one of his objectives had always been to protect them from the evils of alcohol and sex. He goes on to discuss his own life, saying that one of the reasons why he never married is that he viewed being a coach as his vocation. He repeats a phrase from when they were still in high school, "Never take less than success" and tells them that they must to apply this philosophy to their current situation.

Phil tells Coach that while he agrees with him, he still cannot financially support George. Coach relates that he has some news which may change his mind. George interrupts saying that they already told Phil about Sharmen's Communist ties. Undaunted by this, Coach asks George if he wants to win. George replies that he does, but not at the expense of having to accept Phil's help. Coach tells him that sometimes life is not easy and that he will have to endure some pain in order to succeed. Coach asks Phil if he will still support George. Phil remains reluctant, but Coach tries to get him to change his mind by again pointing to Sharmen's Communist ties. Phil tells Coach that he doesn't

think that Sharmen's background is as significant as everyone else believes it to be, and that he truly believes that George will lose the election.

As all of this is going on, Tom is interjecting some humorous comments. He announces to the group that he thinks he has urinated in his pants, but then realizes that he has spilled his beer. Coach implores Tom to not let the alcohol get the best of him. When George leaves the room, James tells the others that he told Phil's secret not for personal gain, but for the good of everyone. He tells Phil that Sharmen is out to ruin him. Phil is not convinced that this is the case, and he tells the others that he cannot afford to support George. If Sharmen wins the election, as he thinks he will, he knows that Sharmen will ruin him financially.

James decides to call Phil's bluff and tells him to contact Sharmen to offer his financial support. Phil takes the telephone and makes the call. He exchanges some pleasantries with Sharmen before giving him the reason for his call. A heated exchange ensues, and Phil slams the telephone down, telling the others that Sharmen laughed at his contribution offer. He tells James that he pushed him into making this call and that by doing so he ruined his chances with Sharmen. As they discuss Sharmen's religious beliefs some more, James suggests that they not make an issue of the fact that he is Jewish since it can be construed as anti-Semitism.

Tom appears at the top of the steps and as he begins to speak, he falls. . They move him to the couch and Coach tells one of the men to get Tom a drink. After Tom is settled on the couch with his drink, Phil tells Coach that he would like to speak with him privately. The two men go out to the porch. After they leave, George tells James and Tom that he feels so much rage and hate that he can understand when people find themselves pushed to violence.

George goes on to discuss the birth of his child and the decision to institutionalize the child. The baby, a boy, wasn't even given a name. He says that Coach told him this was the best thing to do for everyone involved. Then, referring to his wife, he tells them that they had planned to renew their wedding vows on the day of their fifteenth wedding anniversary. Having heard enough of George's self-pity, Tom tells him that he should just take Phil's money and run his campaign. George asks James what he would do if he were in his shoes. James says that his wife would never put him in that position. When George pushes him for an answer, James says that he would take the money anyway. Tom interjects some sarcastic comments that cause James to lash out at him. When George suggests that they shouldn't fight, James tells him that he has spent his entire life taking care of everyone else and he's exhausted. This causes George to lament the fact that he, too, is worn out.

James suggests that Marion may have had the fling with Phil merely to secure the money that George needed for his campaign. George seems a little reluctant to believe this at first, but then gradually warms up to the idea. As he and James discuss the validity of this idea, Tom says that he believes Marion went to Phil only out of lust. Clearly disgusted with his brother's behavior, James tells George that he has lost count of the number of times he has traveled to different cities to find Tom and get him the

help that he needs. Also, when their father died, James was left with his $6,000 debt as well as his funeral expenses. He tells George that he has spent his entire life taking care of others and never rising above mediocrity. Now he wants to seize his chance for success by getting into politics.

Phil enters the room and tells George that Coach would like to see him. When George goes outside, James tells Phil that George will take his contribution. Phil replies that he that very little of this matters to him and that he realizes he has been bored and restless - spending l time replaying past basketball triumphs in his head. He feels the championship season was on of the best times of his life and that nothing that has happened since can match that time..

During the next few minutes, they discuss Marion cheating on George , and that she won't leave him because she knows he will take care of her. Phil tells James and Tom that George never wanted to give up their baby but that Coach and Marion made him do it. Eventually, George returns to the room and tells James that Coach wants to see him next.

James goes outside and returns a moment later with Coach. He repeats what Coach has told him - that George wants to replace him as campaign manager. George justifies his decision, saying that he needs a professional to run his campaign if he is to have any chance of winning. James tells George that if he follows through with this, his own political career will be ruined. George assures him that he will still be involved in the campaign, and that his image should not suffer.

When James turns to Phil for support, Phil tells him that he cannot afford to spend his money on a campaign being run by an amateur. James feels deeply hurt and hurls several insults at Phil. Phil becomes enraged and slaps James, causing his dentures to fall from his mouth and onto the floor. James picks up his dentures and tells Phil and George that if they follow through with their threat to replace him, he will tell everyone about Phil's affair with Marion. When George tells James that he doesn't believe he would do that, Phil tells him about James' suggestion that he run for mayor. As George tries to digest this news, he becomes sick and as the scene ends, he begins to vomit near the team's championship trophy.

Act 2 Analysis

We now begin to realize that Coach isn't the unifying force that he believes himself to be. After the shotgun is taken from George, he initially tells one of the other men to get him a drink. Then he tells George that he has had too much to drink and berates him for not being able to hold his liquor. Later, when Tom falls down the steps, he orders the men to not move him - only to move him to the couch. It is clear that Coach is not in command of the men, or even himself for that matter. Even so, the men allow him to help them sort through their difficulties as he advises each of them separately..

We also learn that George sought Coach's advice following the birth of his developmentally disabled son failing to listen to his own heart when deciding his son's fate. in. This gives us an idea of the extent to which Coach still influences George.

It is also becoming quite clear that Coach is a racist. His use of racial and ethnic slurs becomes even more obvious in this Act. Coach's attitudes are not much different from those of his generation during this period; there was a genuine distrust of people who were different for they were seen as responsible for the city's demise. Likewise, Coach believes that because George's opponent is a Jew means that should he win the election, the city will certainly be doomed.

Coach's attachment to the past is still quite evident. He refers to George's campaign as something that is occurring on his "home court" and is seen getting an old high school sweater from the coat rack. Despite Phil's insistence that they "can't sit around fingering the past;" it is their shared past that keeps these men together through trying times. Ironically, it is Phil who says this, but later admits to spending quite a bit of time replaying the old games in his head. This tells us that like Coach, Phil has not been able to let go of the past.

Another interesting development in Coach's character is his emphasis on winning within the confines of the rules. He mentions this when referring to the championship game when he reminds the men that, "We beat them by the rules," and later as he is discussing George's campaign," We win within the rules." This emphasis on fair play seems to be contrived and provides an indication that Coach doesn't practice what he preaches. Indeed, his advice to George to institutionalize his son was made with George's political career in mind and not his personal interests. Likewise, his advice that George should work to repair his marriage in the face of his wife's infidelity is made in an effort to salvage George's campaign. Based on this, we begin to see that Coach is not above winning at all costs.

George's character undergoes some significant development in Act 2. As he tries comes to terms with his wife's infidelity, we see how emotionally distant he really is. Rather than go home and confront his wife, he chooses to remain with his friends to determine how to best handle his candidacy. He refers to his son as "it" rather than "he" and tells us that he never even bothered to give his son a name. At the same time, however, he pleads with James and Tom to stop fighting because, in his words "Brothers should love...take care of each other." The fact that he substitutes the phrase "take care of each other" for "love" reinforces the fact that he forms his relationships based on obligation and duty rather than love. This sentiment is shared by James when he says that he had no choice but to travel time and again to different cities so that he can care for his brother. Even Phil feels a certain sense of obligation, although in the end, his actions are clearly motivated by self-preservation.

Finally, George's act of vomiting in the trophy, while funny, is significant in that it gives us an idea that perhaps the trophy is somehow tainted.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

As Act 3 opens, George has just finished vomiting. As Coach takes him upstairs to get cleaned up, he instructs one of the others to clean out the trophy. Watching the scene that has just unfolded around him, Phil asks why everyone seems to be so desperate. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a dentist's bill that totals $4,000 - all for work his wife is having - and tells the others that people are only interested in his money. To prove his point, he tells them that Marion asked him for money the third time they were together.

James returns to the room, and says that he feels like his friends have betrayed him. He resents the fact that he has had to sacrifice his own success so that he can help others, but he is determined to finally get what he feels he deserves. Noting that he even had to borrow money from Phil so that he could bury his father, he tells the others that he owns nothing. Phil tells them that although he has more than enough money, it came at the expense of a meaningful relationship with his own father, a man who worked long hours and died at the age of forty-three.

Coach returns to the room and tells the others that George is all cleaned up and that he is telephoning his wife. He tells the men that the evening's events have saddened him - he never imagined that this group of men would ever turn on each other. When Tom suggests that maybe their championship was a myth, Coach becomes enraged. Pointing to the trophy, Coach tells him that there was nothing mythical about what happened all those years ago and that each of them, in their own way, is still very talented.

James does not agree with Coach's point of view, and reminds him that he is only a junior high school principal. Coach reminds him that, although his responsibilities to his father may have gotten in his way, he is still in his eyes, quite successful. When James says that he only wished his father had respected him, Coach berates him, calls him a "whiner," and that he was not given respect when he was forced into retirement.

The men are interrupted by George's entrance into the room. He tells them that Marion admitted to having an affair with Phil, but claims that she did it only to get money for his campaign. When Coach tells George that he better make sure that she is in no way involved with his campaign, George responds by saying that he has too much pride to do that. Coach disagrees and tells George that he has no pride. Then turning to Phil, he tells him that he has ruined his life. Finally, he turns to Tom and tells him that hearing other people laugh at his drunken antics breaks his heart. He recalls their high school days when each boy, in addition to being a gifted athlete, excelled in other areas as well. He then recites a passage from Teddy Roosevelt's, "Man in the Arena" speech before telling the others that the campaign against Sharmen will begin on Monday morning.

James says he will not participate in the campaign until his role is better defined. When Tom makes another sarcastic comment, Coach turns on him and tells him that he is useless, and that he has quit on everyone else. Tom challenges Coach and tells him to stop talking about their championship because according to Martin, the victory was tainted. He goes on to tell the others that twenty years ago, Martin told him that they won the game because Coach told him to purposely injure the opposing team's best player. A week later, he came to Coach and asked him to rescind their victory, but he refused. He tells the men that there is no satisfaction in coming in second place, and that the trophy is irrefutable evidence that they were indeed the champions that year.

Tom still does not relent and tells Coach that he no longer believes in trophies. Coach slaps him across the face and orders him to leave. After Tom leaves, George tells Coach that Martin told him the same thing. Coach tells them to forget about Martin and Tom. Turning nostalgic, he tells them that he will never forget how much he enjoyed seeing them play together, and how it reminded him of his childhood when the entire town would come together to celebrate important accomplishments.

Coach then speaks about his father, a banker who was accustomed to the finer things in life and whose happiness and life was snatched away by the Great Depression. He said that his father blamed the Jews for the Depression. His father seemed so emotionally broken by the Depression that he lost his will to fight back and reclaim what was rightfully his. Coach tells the men that they are the ones charged with the responsibility of bringing the country back to its former prosperity and greatness, and that he will help them achieve this goal just as he helped them become state champions. Finished with his speech, he puts a record on the phonograph and the men sit in silence as they listen to the recording of that final game. When the record ends, Tom returns and the five men sing the school song. When they are finished singing, Phil begins to cry, and he apologizes to George. James likewise offers his support to George. The men plan to meet on Monday morning to begin mapping out their campaign strategy.

As the play ends, the men pose for a photograph around the trophy.

Act 3 Analysis

As we read the play's final act, we begin to see that in many ways, the fate of George, Tom, James and Phil serve as a metaphor for Scranton's decline. When they won the championship, they were on top of the world, however, the events that occurred in their life in the years since that magical day have prevented each of them from realizing their full potential. Despite the beauty of the surrounding area, the city of Scranton has become synonymous with decay.

As the conflict between the characters comes to a head, we begin to see that the only character that really seems to understand what is going on is Tom. While his comments up to this point appeared to be nothing more than the ramblings of an alcoholic, in this act it becomes apparent that Tom actually has a better grasp on what is going on than the others. He is the one who finally confronts Coach about Martin's absence, and he

also asks Coach to stop referring to them as winners and accept them for the failures they really are.

The men, despite all of this, continue to look to Coach for advice and guidance. Even as the play comes to an end, he directs Phil to apologize to George. Interestingly, although each of the men has known the truth about the final game for twenty years, they have each chosen to ignore this truth so that they can hang on to the glory of their championship. As a result, in addition to their betrayals against each other, they have also betrayed themselves. Once the truth is brought into the open, they still continue to ignore it, and once again relive the final moments of their championship game. It seems as though this championship is the only thing that keeps these men together and so they chose to remember it as their one moment to shine rather than as yet another example of how life has disappointed them. We see, as the play ends, the bonds formed by these five men will apparently never be broken.

Characters

Coach

That Championship Season's moral center, Coach, is an older man who coached the other four characters to a high school state basketball championship twenty years earlier. He considers that championship the crowning achievement of his career, if not his life. The victory made him and the other characters local legends. He still receives special treatment in the town because of this long ago victory.

In many ways, Coach lives in the past. He proudly proclaims that he has not changed in sixty years. His living room is nearly a museum to past decades, and he dresses in a suit with a 1940s cut. Coach's values are also out of the 1950s. He is anti-Semitic and pro-Joseph McCarthy and Father Coughlin, a controversial conservative Catholic radio preacher. Victory is to be had at any cost for Coach.

Coach dislikes dissension, especially among his boys. He wants them to succeed in life as they did in the game, and he uses their loyalty to him to influence their decisions.

James Daley

James is one of the players on the 1952 championship team, and the elder brother of Tom Daley. He is married to Helen and has five children. James has remained in his hometown and is currently the principal of the local junior high school. He was also George's campaign manager in the last election, and, at the beginning of the play, holds the position in this election as well. He hopes to run for school superintendent the following year, but when Phil hints that he might not back George for mayor, James offers himself up as an alternative. Phil does not take him up on the offer.

James is resentful of his life and feels betrayed by it. He took care of his alcoholic, dying father and contributes to the support of his alcoholic brother, Tom. James deals with unmanageable students every day of his life. Now he wants his share of the spoils and believes George is the way to get it. By the end of the play, Phil forces George to fire James as campaign manager in favor of outside professionals. Though the group makes up, and James remains on George's staff, James's needs are again regarded as lesser than the whole group's.

Tom Daley

Tom is one of the players on the 1952 championship team, and the younger brother of James Daley. Tom is an alcoholic and drinks heavily throughout the play. He has not attended the past three reunions, and he plans to leave town soon after this one. He is unemployed and has lived in and been kicked out of many places. Tom spends much of the play pointing out the absurdities of the other character's positions on both life and

the issues at hand. He irritates everyone, especially Coach, at some point. James is especially resentful of Tom's life because James is forced to help support him. Tom believes James only acts out of obedience, not love. Tom tells them all why Martin, the fifth player on the team, is not present, though they do not want to believe him. Coach tries to bully Tom into improving his life, but he will not submit. At the end of the play, Tom remains part of the group but still dissenting. Only he can see that they are living in a mythical world.

Phil Romano

Phil is one of the players on the 1952 championship team. He has remained in his hometown, running the successful business he inherited from his father. Phil is very rich and very bored. He finds pleasure in owning material possessions and in sexual relationships. Though he is married to Claire and has two children, Phil and his wife agree to have other relationships, and they both have had numerous affairs. Phil had a liaison with George's wife, Marion, which becomes a point of contention in the play.

With his money, Phil essentially bought George the mayorship in the last election. Phil received a favorable lease on local land in return for his support. Phil has his doubts about George's ability to win this election, and he does not want to put his money behind him again. After deciding to support George's opponent, Norman Sharmen, then being rebuffed by him, Phil decides to fund George's reelection only if he can bring in professional people from outside their group. Phil agrees to support George with Coach's influence. Phil is a team player, but one with more influence than the others in the group.

George Sikowski

George is one of the players on the 1952 championship team. He has remained in his hometown and is currently serving as mayor. George ran for this position because Coach convinced him to. Though in his mind, he has been an ideal mayor, the other characters have pointed out his many shortcomings as a public official.

In many ways, George is the focal point of the reunion. He is running for reelection and is counting on Phil's financial support to help him win again. But George feels betrayed by those around him. His wife recently had an affair with Phil, which wounded him deeply. George accepts her explanation that she did it for his campaign, though this is not exactly true. He is also still upset that he and his wife had a child with Down's syndrome, whom they institutionalized under advisement from Coach.

Like Coach, George believes that winning the championship was the high point of his life. He also adheres to Coach's philosophy of victory at any cost and shares many of his prejudices. Because George wants Phil's money, he is willing to fire his loyal friend and campaign manager James, at Phil's behest, to get it. George does what he is told; he is a follower, not a leader as he believes himself to be.

Themes

Loyalty versus Betrayal

At the center of *That Championship Season* is a tension between loyalty and betrayal among the five characters. Coach both wants and believes he has the absolute loyalty of the four members of his former team. Coach acts as if he is still their coach, the coach of their life. The loyalty comes from their shared experience as the 1952 state champion basketball team. Only George is truly blindly loyal to the Coach and thinks he (George) has the loyalty of the others. The other three are loyal only to a certain degree, to each other and the Coach. They acknowledge the ties of the past, but they have their own life agendas.

These agendas are what create betrayals between them. George and Coach are the ones who feel most betrayed by the others. Phil has an affair with George's wife, Marion, an act that George regards as a betrayal. Phil believes that George does not want to understand his wife, and what she needs. Their affair was just one of many for Phil. The only way George can rationalize the act is by accepting his wife's word that she did it so Phil would give George money for his reelection campaign. James also feels betrayed by George and the others at the end of the play. James has supported George's campaign and served as his manager. James believes that he will eventually be repaid when he runs for school superintendent with George's support the following year. Yet Phil, Coach, and George decide that James will no longer be campaign manager so George can win, effectively ending James's political aspirations. James accepts the decision out of loyalty, but he does not like it.

Coach feels betrayed when there is dissension among his four players. He wants them to do what he believes is right. He thinks highly of them and their skills (ignoring certain truths), but when they act independently, Coach regards it as a betrayal. Coach is very offended by Tom, a drunken loser with no prospects. He feels Tom has wasted his life. But Coach also feels betrayed by time and American society. America has changed politically and socially much more than he has. Demanding loyalty from the men he coached twenty years ago is one way he can counteract the betrayal he feels from life.

Success and Failure

The definitions of success and failure are important components of *That Championship Season*. Coach, and most of the other characters, believe that success is winning. For Coach, the fact that he and these men won a state high school basketball championship means that they will be successes in life. Because this is not necessarily true, Coach goes to extremes to manipulate the men to make it true, no matter who gets hurt. Failure—that is, losing—is unacceptable.

George was elected mayor, making him the epitome of success. However, he only won the post because of the influence of Coach, and Phil's financial support. Phil got some valuable land leases out of the deal; he is a success because of his wealth. Continued success, that is reelection, might be harder, but winning at all costs is the only way. George wants to smear his opponent, Norman Sharmen, by revealing that his uncle was a communist in the 1950s yet does not want anything negative to be said about him by Sharmen. Later, it is revealed that Phil had an affair with George's wife. With her input, George rationalizes it as something she did to secure Phil's campaign contribution. In this case, success is more important than personal failings.

Yet Coach's definition of success at all costs does alienate people. Martin, the best player on the 1952 team, has not spoken to Coach since that time. As Tom tells it, during the championship game, Coach told Martin to take out the other team's best player. Martin broke the ribs of the player, but after the team won, he asked Coach to refuse the trophy because of what he did. Coach ignored Martin's request because to him winning is everything. Though Martin is still respected as a basketball player by them all, they consider him a failure for being disloyal. Tom is also a failure because he is an alcoholic with no prospects. Tom also points out the absurdity of many of their beliefs. Coach tries to get him on the path to success by working for George's campaign, but Tom will have no part of it. Tom is one of the only characters able to see the hollowness of their definition of success, even though their moral failings seem to be so obvious.

Nostalgia, Memory, and Reminiscence

Coach is generally uncomfortable with the present. He believes that the United States is mired in dissension and disloyalty. Coach lives in the past, nostalgic for what used to be. *That Championship Season* is set in his living room, which is cluttered with furnishings and decorations from the past, including pictures of people like Teddy Roosevelt. He dresses in a suit with a 1940s cut. For Coach, as well as George and Phil, winning that championship in 1952 was the highlight of their lives. This meeting is a reunion to celebrate their twenty-year-old victory. Throughout the play, memories from the game and that period in their life are discussed. Coach even plays a recording with the last ten seconds of the game. Coach uses the power of these memories and his obsession with them to influence his former players and their choices. While the men embrace the memories as well, they live in the present day much more than Coach.

Style

Setting

That Championship Season is a drama set in time contemporary with when it was written, 1972. The action is confined to one place, the living room of Coach's house. The living room is practically a museum to the past. The furnishings are frayed, torn, and of an old style. The curtains are made of lace and are dirty. The walls are decorated with pictures of political figures—like Senator Joe McCarthy and John F. Kennedy—and loaded shotguns. The television set is from the 1950s. The silver trophy the team won in 1952 seems to be the best-kept item in the room. The never-married Coach used to share this home with his mother before she died. He apparently never redecorated. This room emphasizes how much Coach lives in the past, how important the championship is in his life, and how big a role nostalgia plays in *That Championship Season*.

Dialogue

The realism of *That Championship Season* is underscored by the dialogue. Miller's characters speak in blunt terms, using the vernacular (common, everyday language). The text is full of slang, vulgarities, and racist and sexist words. The characters also speak in pauses, incomplete thoughts, and sentence constructions used in spoken, not written, language. The realistic dialogue under-scores the time, place, and fraternity these men have together. They are familiar with each other and speak uninhibitedly. The realistic dialogue makes *That Championship Season* all the more believable to audiences. The situations depicted become more credible.

Monologue

Two characters in *That Championship Season* deliver revealing monologues at key points in the play. Though these monologues are ostensibly spoken to the other characters in the room, in most cases, those who deliver these speeches are really talking to themselves in an attempt to understand their own lives. Coach has most of the monologues in the play, revealing much about who he is. Because the other characters are peers, while the Coach was their teacher, they do not have the same familiarity with him as they do with each other. Miller uses monologues to flesh out Coach's character, giving him more depth and background. In his monologues, Coach talks about an affair he had with a Protestant woman, and why they never married; his parents and how the Great Depression contributed to his father's death; his memories of the town; and how important these players were to his life. He also emphasizes how important winning is to him, and how they must win together for him again.

Phil is the only other character that uses monologues in this way in the play. Though his monologues are shorter than Coach's, Phil also reveals something of himself. While George, James, and Coach regard him as basically a source of money, these

monologues show Phil's problems with being rich. He talks about how bored he is with his life, how he drives his fast cars at full speed—which might lead to his death, and how he enjoys his affairs with married women. In other revealing speeches, Phil talks about how he never knew his father, and how he really loved only his mother. Phil may be the winner Coach so admires, but he is unhappy. The use of monologue in this way also draws a parallel between the two characters.

Historical Context

In 1972, the United States was in serious trouble on several fronts. Though incumbent president Richard M. Nixon was overwhelmingly reelected for a second term, it was later revealed that he used dirty tricks, as he had in previous campaigns. Within a short time, this victory was overshadowed by revelations related to the Watergate scandal. In the spring of 1972, during Nixon's campaign, five supporters broke into the offices of the Democratic National Committee located in the Watergate office building. The five were trying to fix electronic eavesdropping equipment that had previously been placed there. Though the break-in was reported, its importance was downplayed, and Nixon used the presidency to cover-up the crime. When the crime was prosecuted in court, and two *Washington Post* reporters published a series of investigative reports, more details were revealed. Nixon was facing impeachment over the matter when he resigned in 1974. Like George and Coach in *That Championship Season*, Nixon was willing to win at any price.

When Nixon was first elected in 1968, one of his campaign promises was to end the war in Vietnam. The United States had been involved in the conflict for many years, and by 1972, their involvement was deeper than ever. In 1972, Nixon pursued means both diplomatic and military to end the war. He bombed land and sea routes to North Vietnam and mined North Vietnamese ports. The United States thought a settlement was near, but they were unable to come to terms with the North Vietnamese. Public and institutional opposition to American involvement had been going on for many years. People were opposed to both the cost and the seemingly endless nature of the war. The war would continue for many more months and would eventually end with the United States on the losing side.

In part because of the enormous cost of the war in Vietnam, the American economy was faltering. Though the Dow Jones Industrial Average hit 1,000 for the first time in 1972, the economy was in a recession and had runaway inflation. The federal deficit continued to grow, which also negatively affected the economy. In 1972, the national debt was $436 billion. Economic concerns would worsen within the year as the price of crude oil increased, and the nations of OPEC declared an oil embargo on the United States for its support of Israel. Throughout the 1970s, there was a growing disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest Americans.

Many Americans were unconcerned about such economic disparities. Society was generally regarded as selfish and passive. Many Americans found solace in nostalgia as a reaction to the problems at hand. Many entertainment and artistic genres, including theater, film, and television, featured nostalgic products. *Grease* (1972), a musical about high school in the 1950s was in the theaters. *American Graffiti*, also about high school aged characters in the 1950s, was released in 1973. One of the most popular shows on television in the 1970s was *M*A*S*H*, a war comedy set during the Korean War (1950-53). Movies were also more violent and realistic than in previous decades, reflecting the coarser nature of American society in the 1970s.

Critical Overview

When *That Championship Season* was first produced, the play was generally praised by critics who had found the quality of plays in New York on the decline. Though there were those who had various problems with the play, they were a distinct minority. Clive Barnes of the *The New York Times* is one critic who believes *That Championship Season* struck a deep chord. He writes

This is an enormously rich play. It is one of those strip-all, tell-everything plays in the tradition of *Virginia Wolf* or *Boys in the Band*. These are hollow men, bereft of purpose, clinging to the empty ambition of p ower. . . . They are morally and intellectually bankrupt. And yet they are human, recognizable and even, in a way, likable.

The way Miller drew these characters, and what these characters represent, appeals to many critics. Barnes' colleague at the *The New York Times* Walter Kerr believes it "is a play that commands, and seems to possess, a second sight. Its people are not just stand-ins for the rest of us, handy pegs to make a pattern or point a moral. They are people who don't want to get their shirts wet." Douglas Watt of *Daily News* concurs, believing "The play . . . is brimming with vitality. Miller writes with strength and insight. His people are vivid and their situation becomes vital to us." Catharine Hughes of *America* also agrees. She argues

That Championship Season is a good play, one of the very best—'conventional' or otherwise—American dramas of recent years. It is good for a quite simple reason: its characters are good, ring true, throughout. Equally important, it uses the recent past to illuminate the present, personal concerns to develop public insights, yet manages to be unobtrusive about it.

Several critics point out the power of Miller's writing, especially his use of the vernacular, for these men. *The New Yorker's* Edith Oliver writes, "As the evening progresses and the men get drunker and drunker, everything is revealed about them and about the way they live and have lived and how they have been damaged and disappointed—and revealed in conversation, rather than in synthetic soliloquies." While Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* agrees with Oliver and others about Miller's dialogue, he finds the play wanting. Kroll argues

the men are shown to be a microcosm of America in decay: moral emptiness, fear, venality, bullying impotence. Miller writes with great theatrical effect; his dialogue is sharp and funny. The play works as a machine . . . but . . . it is thin underneath and its thesis, that the winner-take-all ethic explains everything bad about America, is much too simple-minded.

While several other critics have similar reservations about *That Championship Season*, a few could find very little to like about the play. Richard Watts of the *New York Post* writes, "They are, in fact, a group of deadly bores, and herein lies the weakness of Mr. Miller's drama. When they get in their cups, which is quickly, they may reveal the truth

about themselves and their hatreds, but, in the midst of their self-revelations, they grow occasionally tiresome." *Saturday Review*'s Henry Hewes believes, "*That Championship Season* 's theatrical effectiveness depends less on thesis than on its freeswinging delineation of a very recognizable kind of nitty-gritty vulgarity." Along similar lines, Stanley Kauffmann of *The New Republic* argues, "The play brings out different degrees of rattiness and deception and venality and disintegration in each, together with glib revelations of race and religious prejudice that are all small reverse pats on the back for the superior audience."

After the first run of *That Championship Season*, the play was occasionally produced in the United States and other countries. While most critics of these productions found some value in Miller's writing, the play and its prejudices did not age well. Of a production in Boston in 2000, Karen Campbell of *The Boston Globe* who generally praises *That Championship Season* remarks, "this is compelling and provocative theater, if somewhat dated as social commentary."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petrusso explores the overriding role that the past plays in That Championship Season.

In Jason Miller's seminal 1972 play, *That Championship Season*, four members of a high school basketball team gather at the home of their coach for a reunion marking the twentieth anniversary of their state championship victory. (The fifth member of the team has never come to a reunion. It is revealed why he has chosen not to remember the victory over the course of the play.) This party is not merely a reunion. It is also an opportunity for Coach to use his team motivating and managing techniques on his former team.

George Sikowski, one of the teammates, is currently the town's mayor and is running for reelection. His advisor/campaign manager is another teammate, James Daley. George's first campaign was funded by a third teammate, the wealthy Phil Romano. Phil is hesitant about funding George's campaign again, for George has not been a great mayor. The fourth teammate, Tom Daley (James's younger brother), no longer lives in town and has a problem with alcohol. Each of these characters, as well as their actions in *That Championship Season*, are defined and ruled by the past. The past includes not only their victory but the values, relationships and motivations from their high school era. This essay looks at how the past affects each aspect of the play.

More than any other character or part of the play, Coach lives only in the past, not in the present. Though Coach was forced to retire after thirty years of teaching for breaking a student's jaw when a boy made an obscene gesture to his face, he still goes by Coach. The audience never learns his real name. Coach is nothing but a coach and has no desire to be anything else.

The reunion takes place in Coach's living room, which itself is a monument to the past. At the beginning of act 1, Miller describes the setting. Nearly everything in the room is old or old-fashioned. The furniture is frayed, the wallpaper is faded and stained, and the lace curtains are dirty. The television set is from the 1950s, while the pictures on the wall include Teddy Roosevelt, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and John Kennedy. The only things that seem neatly kept are his shotguns (which are prominently displayed on gun racks) and the championship trophy from that victory.

Coach is the driving force in *That Championship Season*. Because he lives so deeply in the past, both literally and figuratively, it is also one of the most compelling motivators in the play. Physically, Coach wears a suit with a 1940s cut. Socially, Coach believes in the values of a bygone era.

Though somewhat conservative forces were in power in the United States in 1972 (President Richard M. Nixon and his supporters), Coach worships the anticommunist values of men like McCarthy. In the 1950s, the senator held anticommunist hearings in which he outed supposed communists and their sympathizers. McCarthy often had little

or no evidence for his allegations, but they ruined many lives. Coach is also a fan of Father Coughlin, a Catholic priest who had a popular radio show in the 1930s and early 1940s. Like McCarthy, Coughlin revealed what he called the "truth" about minority groups, and those of other religions and political persuasions, before his activities were curbed. Coach believes such men were wrongfully muzzled, and that American society currently allows too much dissension and too much questioning of authority in its ranks.

More immediately, what Coach values above all else is winning, and he will win at any price. He is convinced it is the American way. His motto is "Never take less than success." To keep his "team" together, Coach reminds them of the importance of "Pride. Loyalty. Teamwork. No other way." Coach also believes that one has to pay the price of pain for victory. He says in act 2, "You endure pain to win, a law of life, no other way, none." While Coach says he believes in playing by the rules, in act 2 he also says, "Exploiting a man's weakness is the name of the game. He can't move to the left, you left him to death. . . . Find his weak sp ot and go after it. Punish him with it."

Coach knows these beliefs are true because he has won with them before. He got the men in the room to win a high school state basketball championship in 1952 using such tenets. This victory, which defined his and several of the other characters' lives, is the primary reason why Coach can live in the past. The trophy and his team are the concrete examples that Coach is right. Coach uses the past victory to influence, if not control, the present lives of George, Phil, and James. Tom can clearly see the problems in Coach's philosophies and is relatively immune to Coach's pressure. Still Coach tries to get them to work together to achieve more victories by reminding them, among other things, that "You turn on each other, and you don't have a chance alone, not a solitary chance."

The man who buys into Coach's philosophies the most, who is thus living in the past the most, is George. George believes that the high school basketball team's victory is the highlight of his life, more than even being the town's mayor. However, that post comes a close second and makes George a winner in present time. George believes he is a great mayor and deserves to run "his town." George is even mayor because of Coach. George follows nearly everything Coach says to the letter. It was Coach who convinced him to run for mayor in the first place. Coach has a strong grip on George's whole life. He also convinced George to place his infant with Down's syndrome in an institution, though George resisted such a move for a long time. Though Coach acknowledges some of George's shortcomings as mayor, he has much invested in his former player. Coach wants him to win again, so that he can continue to coach him.

Coach is adamant that the values of the group are above individual values. Because Coach so wants George to be reelected, he and James convince George to overlook the fact that Phil had an affair with George's wife. Morals can be conveniently overlooked and/or rationalized when fighting the good fight. For his part, George has also taken to heart Coach's belief that victory is had by those who exploit their opponent's weaknesses. His opponent in the mayoral race, Norman Sherman, has two weaknesses that George wants to exploit; one weakness is that he is Jewish and two is that he has a communist for an uncle (later revealed to be a cousin). George does not

see how these supposed weaknesses are mostly past prejudices, out of sync with the times and the voters. At one point, George calls Sharmen "an ecology nut," yet the ecology movement was becoming more and more important in this time period. In act 2, Phil dismisses George by saying, "George isn't a modern man."

Phil is controlled by the past in two ways. The first is the source of his wealth. Phil's father worked night and day to build a successful business before dying at an early age. Though Phil worked with his father, he did not really know him. Phil inherited the business and the money and is now a rich man. This wealth makes Phil unhappy. He is bored with life and believes that many of his friends use him just for his money.

But Phil has one memory that keeps him going: the championship game. He says in act 2 that it is "my best memory to date, yeah, nothing matched it, nothing." Because of the power of that memory and his loyalty to Coach, Phil ends up agreeing to financially support George's campaign for reelection by the end of the play. The decision is not an easy one. Though Sharmen's election would not be good for Phil's business (with George in office, Phil has favorable leases on land for strip mining), Phil does not believe that George can win or is even a good mayor. Phil regards George as incompetent and as having an image problem. When challenged by James, Phil calls Sharmen and offers a contribution in exchange for political favors. Though Phil is turned down, it takes Coach using the past (in the form of a Fillmore High jacket) to convince him. Unlike George, however, Phil sees the hold the past has on them and their town. Though he is referring to his "arrangement" with his wife, Phil could be speaking about the group at hand when he says in act 2, "everybody around here lives in the Dark Ages, pitch black."

Like Phil and George, James also believes that he owes much to Coach and that the victory was an important moment in his life. James is another character who is trapped in the past. James is a team player in Coach's current project, as the campaign manager and adviser to George. Unlike the others, James feels he is years behind everyone else because he always has responsibilities that limit his ability to succeed. In addition to taking care of George politically, James had to care for his abusive, alcoholic father before his death. He currently supports his alcoholic brother, Tom. James's job is as a junior high principal, which involves taking care of the student body.

James tries to live in the future, even if past relationships and family keep holding him back. He wants to run for school superintendent the following year, after George has been elected. He offers himself up as an alternate candidate to George when Phil does not want to support him. James is turned down. Someday, James hopes to run for congress. But his dreams seem dashed by the pull of past loyalties. Phil will not fund George's campaign with James as manager. He insists on bringing in outside professionals to run the campaign and improve George's image. While James eventually agrees to a more limited role in the campaign, these events clearly demonstrate how oppressive the past can be in these men's lives.

The one man in *That Championship Season* who sees problems with Coach's outlook and the power of the past is Tom. He never says this victory was his shining moment,

and he resists all efforts to become deeply entangled in this codependent campaign. It is not clear why Tom is present at all. He has serious problems with alcohol and has missed three previous reunions. Tom is leaving the next day for another city. Miller uses Tom as the play's conscience. He points out the absurdities in everything that is said.

Tom also remembers the truth about their hollow victory twenty years ago. In act 3, Tom reveals the reason why Martin, the best player on the team and the one who had the winning basket, has never come to a reunion. During the game, Coach told Martin to injure the other team's best player so their team would win. Martin broke the player's ribs, and later asked Coach to return the trophy and renounce the victory because of his action. Coach would not give up his moment of glory, which has defined him to this day. Because of this, Tom says, "We are a myth." Though only Tom believes Martin, Tom knows that the past they cling to and that defines them is tenuous at best and does not really exist.

At several points in *That Championship Season*, moments from that championship game are relived. They are used by Coach to keep them together so that his hold remains as firm as possible on his team. In act 2, Coach says, "You can't make it alone, George, not anymore. Gone forever, those days, gone." Only Tom does not believe this. Deep down, even George knows the score. He admits late in act 2, "Everything is in the past tense. I'm in the past tense." For the men in *That Championship Season*, the past is only inescapable if you let it be.

Source: Annette Petrusso, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the way the Coach and his boys function as a team.

When *That Championship Season* first opened off Broadway in 1972, it immediately won a host of critical acclaim. In his introduction to the published script, the play's producer, Joseph Papp, explained why he believed the play was a "winner." According to Papp, "The work evokes a feeling of tradition, but in the real sense, the play is a modern work with its basic roots in America. Its simplicity is deceptive—but it is this simplicity translated into recognizable human form that gives the work its extraordinary power." This drama, which Papp called, "a play for the people of America," explores the frailty of humanity through a group of friends gathered for an annual reunion that celebrates the highlight of their lives, winning a state championship in high school basketball. In his discussion on Miller in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Jonathan Hershey calls *That Championship Season* a "character study of men who refuse to examine the moral bankruptcy of their lives and their perverted values of competition."

The men at the reunion are George, the town's mayor; Phil, a wealthy businessman; James, a junior high school principal who also works as George's campaign manager; Tom, James's brother who is an unemployed alcoholic; and Coach, the men's former basketball coach. Collectively, the men exhibit a host of undesirable traits. They are prejudiced and bigoted. George tells racial and ethnic jokes, some directed at his so-called friends. George's mayoral opponent, Sharmen, is alternately referred to as "the Jew" or "Sharmawitz." The men privately denigrate each other, such as when George asserts to Tom that "Phil's not bright, really." They are selfish and self-involved. One statement of Phil's best typifies their lack of caring about others: "I like being rich, okay. I need money. I want two of everything. Cars, boats, women, etc., etc. Around expensive things I get a hard on, turned on, I want them."

Like Phil, the men all exhibit moral degradation of some sort. George is the most obvious representation of corruption. He vocally revels in the power he holds over other people through his position as mayor. His exploitation of the office ranges from the mundane, such as fixing parking tickets for his friends, to the extreme, such as awarding Phil lucrative land-mining contracts in return for campaign support. George also reveals his intention to back James for school superintendent after the election. "That's patronage," Tom points out, to which George complacently replies, "I know. Is there any other way?"

An ugly glimpse into the men's shared past is revealed early on through an exchange between Tom and George:

TOM Hey, I remembered somebody. I saw her standing by the library yesterday. Mary . . . what's-her-name.

GEORGE Who?

TOM The epileptic. Mary . . . you know, the one we banged in your garage. . . . We were freshmen or something.

GEORGE I don't remember.

GEORGE Don't ever breathe a word. . . . She wasn't an epileptic. She was only retarded not a word. It could ruin me. She was raped here about two years ago. . . .

The passage shows how the friends treat and feel about people who have less power. People become, for this group of friends, only objects to use for their own purposes. As young men, they sexually abused a girl but feel no shame; the only true emotion that George has about this event is fear— fear that it could adversely affect his political career.

The corruption depicted in the play extends to the group's family members. George's wife, Marion, lacks a moral center. Early in act 1, George tells Tom that Marion is his conscience. The irony of his statement is revealed later, when George—and his friends —learn about Marion's affair with Phil. Phil's collection of stag films apparently comes from George's brother-in-law, the chief of police. George sees no reason to defend his brother-in-law's actions; instead, he seems to admire his brother-inlaw's ingenuity: "He sells what he's confiscated. Isn't free enterprise something else?"

Coach, however, is the most crude and regressive of all the men. Derogatory epithets such as "nigger" constantly pepper his speech. He calls George's wife Marion a "hot-pantsed b—h" and tells George to "Go home and kick her ass all over the kitchen." He despises "liberal bulls—t" and idealizes Joseph McCarthy, the senator who in the early 1950s led the nation on a communist witch hunt that ruined the careers and lives of many innocent people.

Coach is caught up in the days of what he considers to be his past glory. From his first appearance on the stage, his ties to the past are readily apparent: he wears a suit that is cut in the style of the 1940s. Although he relives the championship season, he claims the boys are what are most important to him. They are his "real trophies." He tells them at the beginning of the reunion, "Oh, Christ, boys, Christ, it's so good . . . the joy in my heart to feel you around me again." In speaking of their ball playing, he calls them, "a thing of rare . . . beauty."

Like Coach, his "boys" cannot escape the past, both the good memories and the bad. The championship game, however, has held the men in its thrall all these years. Within the opening moments of the play, the audience is keenly attuned to this reality through George's assertion that "I am sincerely more proud of winning that championship than I am of being mayor of this town." The other men reinforce George's attitude. Phil later comments, "Sometimes I think that's the only thing I can still feel, you know, still feel in my gut, still feel that championship season, feel the crowds . . . my best memory to date, yeah, nothing matched it, nothing."

The former teammates, all grown men almost forty, still rely on their coach for advice and validation. It was Coach's idea for George to run for mayor. "I owe my whole life, success to that man," George declares, thereby negating any other influences, his own included, on his political victory. It is Coach who advises George to place his son, born with Down's syndrome, in an institution. The child would impair George's political career, so George agrees to this plan, though it goes against his own wishes.

Coach maintains control through his constant emphasis on teamwork. This method works on the boys because none of them feel their accomplishments have measured up to their championship game. Coach takes whatever steps he feels necessary to make the men act like a team when their cooperation threatens to break down. For instance, when George demands that Phil relate Marion's sexual prowess, Coach snaps, "What's wrong with you, it's none of your business!" Clearly, he is trying to defuse an understandably volatile situation that could pit George and Phil against each other. Coach understands that "You turn on each other, and you don't have a chance alone, not a solitary chance." Indeed, the histories of the men bear out the truth of Coach's words. George would not have been elected without Phil's generous campaign contribution. Phil admits that without George's support, he faces "a complete business disaster." James's job, and more importantly, his political aspirations, come from his association with George. Without each other, these men would be outward failures as well as personal failures.

To further promote a sense of team spirit, Coach reminds the men, "We were one flesh twenty years ago; never forget that as long as you live!" Indeed, the men need plenty of urging to reconnect to their past closeness. Tom snidely questions any statement that George makes. Phil has carried on an affair with George's wife and has secretly planned to take his support from George and give it to his formidable opponent. James reveals the affair and also proposes that he run for mayor in place of George. Ironically, the men all feel that they have done nothing wrong but that the others have wronged them. This attitude is best typified through James's reaction upon learning of his demotion from campaign manager; he declares that Phil and Coach have "knife[d] me in the back." By the end of the play, however, Coach's words are borne out; the men are intrinsically joined together. Even though their dislike and distrust of each other is readily apparent—in Hershey's phrasing, "They betray each other while claiming to be friends"—they return to each other.

The men maintain this connection because only when they band together are they able to accomplish some of their goals. They won the state championship twenty years ago, and they have since continued to work as a team, albeit a dysfunctional one. When the men discuss the challenge George's opponent Sharmen poses, James reminds them, "But it we can coordinate ourselves—" Phil shares that his best moments in life these days are "replay[ing] the good games in my head." They "[C]ould call each other's moves . . . every time."

Only Tom negates this ideal of teamwork. An inherent irony the play presents is that although Tom and James are brothers, of all the men, Tom is the odd man out. He has physically distanced himself from the group for three years in a row, skipping the annual

reunions and missing out on the social machinations. He resists all efforts to draw him into the group via George's upcoming election. He also is the only person who openly mocks the hypocritical team mentality. Objecting to the proposed smear campaign against Sharmen, he pretends not to understand that Sharmen's "on the other side now." He even declares that he is "ready to campaign for Sharmen." In act 3, after Coach has gotten everyone to agree to his plans for the election by invoking memories of their championship game, Tom alone dissents. "Stop lying to us," he says, "Stop telling us how good we were."

There is also one other missing element, the fifth member of the winning team, Martin. When Martin's name is first introduced, in act 1, the men treat his memory with an emotion akin to reverence. "Let's say a little prayer for him, boys," extols Coach, "a prayer that he's safe and happy and still a champion." At the end of the play, however, the audience learns why Martin has chosen to renounce the team: following Coach's orders to "get that nigger center, the kangaroo," Martin went after the player and ended up breaking his opponent's ribs. He wanted Coach to refuse to accept the trophy, but Coach would not. "He came babbling something about the truth," Coach recalls. "What truth, I said, we won. That trophy is the truth the only truth." At the time when Martin shared this story, they did not stand by him against the Coach. Now Tom reminds the others that they "stole that trophy, [the] championship season is a lie." When faced with Tom's defection, the other men suddenly change their opinions about Martin. Suddenly, he transforms from the "perfect ballplayer" whom they think about often and love into "a real sonofab—h" and someone who "didn't have a brain."

The discord among the men at this reunion threatens their team, and thus, their sense of self. Before reaching general consensus again, the men reveal their vulnerability. George tells the others, "I can't find . . . myself. . . . I lose myself behind all the smiles, handshakes, speeches. I don't think I'm the man I wanted to be, I seem to myself to be somebody else." In this speech, George shows his dissatisfaction with a life empty except for the political role he inhabits, which is far from assured. For his part, James is "beginning to see myself" as a mediocre person and is upset that his gifted son recognizes him as such. Phil is "so bored half the time it's killing me." Their personal dissatisfaction and their dissatisfaction with each other is mutually parasitic; one feeds the other.

It is Coach who brings the men back together in act 3. Several verbal tactics remind the boys that they are a winning team. Coach uses negative reinforcement, at one point mocking the men's vulnerabilities. He also attacks their loss of camaraderie. "Never did I think I'd live to see you turn savagely . . . savagely turn on each other. You're not the same people who played for me." He draws on his own memories of past failures and successes: the Great Depression, idyllic town picnics, and the loss of American leadership. He invokes the ideals of patriotism, telling the men that "Somebody has to lead the country back again." His final rally of his team of "winners" whom he "won't let lose" ends with his replaying a recording of the final ten seconds of the championship game.

Coach's reliance on the championship season, and the trophy that represents it, overcomes any dissent. When Tom drunkenly mumbles to himself, "We are a myth." Coach overhears this denigrating comment and responds with great vigor: "Is that trophy a myth! See the names engraved on it!" This exchange underscores the truth: that the teammates are winners only in terms of winning the state championship—not in any personal way. They became "champions" by unscrupulous means, and they have followed this pattern of deceit throughout their lives. Although Coach attempts to hold on to the moment of glory by "carving [the boy's] names in silver" to make the moment "last forever," his action is in vain. The trophy becomes a hollow symbol for the their so-called life successes.

By the end of the play, the men, with the exception of Tom, have all made up. They have asked each other's forgiveness and declared their fraternal devotion. They also agree to work as a team to secure George's reelection. The play culminates in their gathering around the trophy, taking pictures, reasserting their supremacy in a world where white men such as themselves own the basketball courts—a world that no longer exists.

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In his essay, Frank Shelton compares two plays, including Jason Miller's That Championship Season, *written a decade apart to show how America's ideas regarding competition and success has changed within that time.*

"We are the country, boys, never forget that, never," asserts the Coach to his returning players in Jason Miller's play, *That Championship Season*. A horrifying thought, yet characteristic of a number of American plays of the 1970's, which attempt to portray through a limited number of characters the corruption of America and the American dream. *That Championship Season*, a multiple award-winning drama, seemed to revive the realistic wellmade play as a viable vehicle for such purposes, and a comparison with *Death of a Salesman*, of a generation earlier but with similar thematic and structural elements, will illustrate how our view of ourselves has changed under the influence of the Cold War and the Nixon years. In fact, the overlay of specific political content in Jason Miller's play suggests that politics has strongly affected his view of contemporary America.

In comparing the plays, a worthwhile starting point is the motif of sports—central to *That Championship Season* and seemingly only peripheral to *Death of a Salesman*. Yet the myth and ethic of sports in truth undergird both plays. Ideally the world of sports is a world set apart, independent and clearly structured, in which the game is played according to rules accepted by all participants. It is a world where one can succeed through sacrifice, hard work, and courage, a world of simple order offering the potential for heroic action. Biff Loman played football, while the characters in *That Championship Season* played basketball, in itself a suggestive comparison. For paradoxically, though Biff grew up in the city, it is basketball which is a particularly urban game. The centrality of the sport of basketball to our progressively more urban society may be one reason for Jason Miller's use of that sport. America's increasing urbanization is important to *Death of a Salesman*, but the presence of the game of football suggests that green spaces and pastoral areas still exist, an important theme in the play as a whole.

It may seem a long leap from sports to salesmanship in *Death of a Salesman*, but actually both endeavors are based on competition, on winning through striving to be number one. Seeing his sons as Adonises on the playing field, Willy is sure that they will have no trouble attaining equal success in the adult world, a feeling the Coach shares. Success in athletics is thus equated with success in life, a common enough attitude in our present sports-oriented culture, but one which the plays show to be fallacious, for the younger men in both are anything but successful.

The central structural device of the two plays is the homecoming—Biff returning on the one hand and the four players having their yearly reunion on the other. Perhaps the most striking parallel between the plays is the similarity between Willy and the Coach, the older adults to whom the younger characters keep returning. Almost against his will, Biff is periodically drawn back to his father, who continues to have a strong hold over his life. Jason Miller has said that his characters are all searching for a father, and the

Coach is actually the nearest thing to a father they have. He has made them what they are, as Willy has formed his sons, with devastating results.

Both Willy and the Coach are out of place in the modern world—a fact first indicated by the settings of the plays. The Coach's living room is described as *A large and expansive living room in a Gothic-Victorian tradition. The dominant mood of the room is nostalgia*. Of Willy's single family dwelling, threatened by looming apartment houses, Arthur Miller suggests that *An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality*. Choosing to live in such surroundings, both characters declare their allegiance to the past. Their pasts are very different, however. The Coach's loaded guns and the picture of Joseph McCarthy on his wall evoke the reactionary violence lurking beneath the surface of his character, while Willy's past is embodied by the recurring flute music, *small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon*. Both characters too are present failures; Willy is fired during the course of the play and the Coach has already been fired for striking a boy.

In their current situations, they look to their boys for fulfillment and the justification of their own ideals. The Coach's "You were a thing of rare . . . beauty, boys," his more desperate "You're all still immensely talented" echo Willy's "You got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that. You got all kinds of greatness." In both cases the boys' present failure clashes sharply with their remembered success, but the Coach and Willy, through force of personality, and their power is considerable, attempt to impose success on them.

"Never settle for less than success," a well-worn slogan of the Coach's, could also be Willy's motto. In fact they measure success in the same ways, with Willy's emphasis on contacts and being well-liked corresponding to the Coach's pride when the policeman remembers him and tears up the speeding ticket. Even more important both characters exhibit a deep division of self. The Coach is described upon his first entrance as a *Huge man. Old Testament temperament. A superb actor. A man of immense and powerful contradictions*. His contradictions are gradually revealed in the course of the play. He begins by emphasizing teamwork, love, pride, and loyalty as the keys to success. Gradually this modulates into: "Exploiting a man's weakness is the name of the game," until finally he says, "you have to hate to win, it takes hate to win."

Though possessing a volatile temper, basically Willy is not a violent man. Much kinder than the Coach, he does, however, reveal some of the same kinds of contradictions. Consider, for example, the two men who embody his ideals. On the one hand is Dave Singleman, the perfect salesman who made his living through contacts, never even having to leave his hotel room to finalize a sale. If Willy is to be believed, he was universally loved. Yet there is also brother Ben, equally Willy's ideal, who went into the jungle and came out rich. His greatest lesson, which Willy does not seem to comprehend, is: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way."

Describing Willy Loman's tragic stature, Arthur Miller wrote:

It matters not at all whether a modern play concerns itself with a grocer or a president if the intensity of the hero's commitment to his course is less than the maximum possible . . . if the intensity, the human passion to surpass his given bounds, the fanatic insistence upon his serf-conceived role—if these are not present there can only be an outline of tragedy but no living thing.

I do not want to revive the tired debate over Willy Loman's tragic stature, and even less to suggest that the Coach is a tragic hero; yet perhaps the most significant similarity between Willy and the Coach is the powerful intensity of their commitment to their ideals. The Coach shows a strain of bigotry and hate absent in Willy, but both attempt to transmit a vision of heroism and wholeness to future generations. Both visions are corrupt, but a quality more emphasized in Willy, his love for his sons, is also present in the Coach. Devoting his life to moulding young men, he has been concerned deeply and sincerely for them, as Willy's life was lived for his boys.

Certainly neither realizes that he is responsible for the frustration and failure of the younger men, but the sons in both plays are paralyzed by the influence of the father figures on them. Jason Miller's comment on his basketball players—that they are men facing middle age with a sense of terror and defeat—is also applicable to Biff Loman, a thirty-four year old man who has yet to find himself. In fact, all the younger men are immature and unable to grow up. Biff's asking his mother to dye her hair again so she will still be his pal is but one instance. A closer parallel to *That Championship Season* is the dream of Happy and Biff to sell sporting goods by organizing two teams, the Loman Brothers, to travel around the country giving sporting exhibitions. To Happy, "the beauty of it is, Biff, it wouldn't be like a business. We'd be out playin' ball again. . . . There'd be the old honor, and comradeship." Such a dream takes literally the Coach's concept of life as a game and shows how adolescent such an idea is. Only one side of Biff's divided nature can respond to such an appeal. Unlike the characters in *That Championship Season*, he has experienced a fulfilling life out West.

Pathetically the characters in *That Championship Season* have no such ideal with which to counter the Coach's emphasis on success. The gradual unfolding of the play reveals that they are all failures; James consumed with a sense of his own mediocrity and a determination to get his rightful share of the spoils; Paul monetarily successful but so bored that he can be stirred from his lethargy only by fast cars and fast women; George, the mayor of the town, blurting in a moment of painful candor, "I can't find . . . myself. . . . I lose myself behind all the smiles, handshakes, speeches"; Tom the chronic alcoholic, seemingly the most complete failure of all.

Even though the Coach has preached love and teamwork, and apparently the players have believed him, they are constantly at one another's throats. Both James and Paul are ready to replace George as candidate for mayor, Paul is willing to support the opposing candidate, and George wants to dump James as his campaign manager. They have no love for one another; each is out simply for himself. In a strange way this very situation is the fulfillment of the Coach's ethos of competition. Love and competition are in truth opposites, mutually exclusive. Willy too devoted himself to a life based on love, personal regard, and contacts, but when he is fired, the business world, centered as it is

around competition, is shown to have no room for love, fellow feeling, the human element. Thus the world of sports, theoretically based on such human feelings, is no different from the "real" world.

Tom, in a sense the most lost of the former basketball players, forces the truth to come out— that in effect they stole that championship game. The world of sports, apparently an ideal world governed by rules of conduct, is a fraud, for competition leads to the subversion of those very rules in the sacred name of success. Tom and Biff become the vehicles for the revelation of the truth about the Coach and Willy. Though the ideals both held are based on lies, they do not lie to their boys so much as to themselves, and they show a similar resistance to the truth. Tom tells the Coach, "Stop lying to us. Stop telling us how good we were," and proceeds to reveal how Martin was instructed to injure the opposing team's top player. However, the Coach and the others will not listen or admit that Tom's story is the truth. As the Coach says, "That trophy is the truth, the only truth." For these characters truth is identical with a material object. The Coach, because of his powerful devotion to his beliefs and because his boys have a commitment to nothing to put in their place, is able to make his vision prevail. All are reunited again by the end; the hard truths which have come out during the play are papered over. They come together in the face of a common enemy, Sharmen, against whom they can unite in competition.

Biff plays a role in *Death of a Salesman* similar to Tom's. In his climactic confrontation with his father, he is determined to tell the truth about himself and Willy. "No, you're going to hear the truth—what you are and what I am. . . . We nev er told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" Yet truth, the falsity and emptiness of his dreams, has no effect on Willy. Like the Coach in his refusal to listen, he carries out his suicide, a plan predicated on the same materialistic values as the Coach's.

The failure of the truth in *Death of a Salesman*, however, is not as complete as in *That Championship Season*. Ultimately Willy does realize that Biff loves him, and we see that all Biff's confusion arises from his frustrated love for Willy. The basic failure of the characters in *That Championship Season* is a failure of the heart, while in a sense the triumph in *Death of a Salesman* is one of love. Unlike the characters in *That Championship Season* who end just as they began, having faced their own emptiness but out of sheer terror denying it, Biff is able to say at the end, "I know who I am." His brother, Happy, like Phil, George and James, resists the truth and remains committed to the ethos of competition and success. Like Tom, Biff turns his back on that dream. Unlike Tom, who has nothing but alcoholic numbness to replace it, Biff gains self-knowledge.

His sense of himself is in fact a legacy from his father, who had really only been happy working with his hands. In a profound sense the American agrarian dream undergirds both plays. Even though *Death of a Salesman* takes place in a city, where the population is a constant menace, Biff feels that he can be himself out West, which remains an arena for individual and independent action. Individuality is still possible in the world of *Death of a Salesman*, though it involves a rejection of contemporary American values. By contrast *That Championship Season* suggests the opposite, for its

action bears out the Coach's statement that you can't do it alone anymore. The characters simply have no sense of themselves as worthwhile individuals. The play also provides one explanation for America's fall. While it is set in a much smaller city than New York, the main industry of the town is strip mining, with Phil the main beneficiary. Nature is being destroyed by industrial America, and no great good place remains for the man who wants to find himself. Tom, the vehicle for truth in the play, is directionless. The only character for whom one can hope is Martin, the absent player who rejected wholly the Coach's values. However, he never appears, and the characters who do appear refuse to recognize the significance of his absence.

Thus a comparison of the two plays measures America's fall in the two and a half decades between them. The ethos of competition and success has a much stronger hold on the characters of *That Championship Season*, and they are unable to cope with their emptiness. Although there was no hope for Willy Loman, at least Biff could take the best of his father's legacy and build a meaningful life around it. The agrarian dream, based on concepts other than material success, had a force and a possibility for Biff lost to the Americans of *That Championship Season*.

Source: Frank W. Shelton, "Sports and the Competitive Ethic: *Death of a Salesman and That Championship Season*," in *Ball State University Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 1979, pp. 17-21.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review, author John Simon discusses the play's parallels of life and the game in Jason Miller's That Championship Season.

It was a good feeling, last spring when the New York Drama Critics' Circle was voting for the best play of the season, to find myself in a quandary: whether to vote for David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* or Jason Miller's *That Championship Season*. Two good plays do not exactly constitute an embarrassment of riches. But they were both American plays; had both, thanks to Joseph Papp, made it to Broadway; and two good dramas on Broadway in one calendar year was more than we had had in some time. I have written here about Rabe's play before; now for Jason Miller's.

That Championship Season is a necessary play. In a naturalistic way it does more or less the same thing that *Sticks and Bones* does in its absurdistsymbolist fashion: it tells grass-roots America that it stinks. For even in this Vietnam-war-waging, Nixon-favoring, culture-despising year of 1972, when Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* is the hottest ticket on Broadway, when *The Godfather* is the biggest cinematic money-maker, when Herman Wouk, Taylor Caldwell and Irving Wallace are perching on top of the best-seller list, there remains considerable faith in the solid backbone of America, the good and simple folk back in the small towns, the America that the two Walts, Whitman and Disney, could hear singing, the unspoiled, sweet salt of the earth. And it is these people that Miller reveals to be weak, cowardly, prejudiced, corrupt and sustained, if at all, by self-delusion. And what makes the indictment stick is, first, that it is made from an evident position of intimate knowledge and understanding of the people portrayed, and, secondly, that the judgment is made regretfully, without rancor, almost with love.

Understanding is clearly necessary for an intelligent verdict. The locale of the play, as we gather from both internal and external evidence, is Scranton, Pennsylvania, where Miller was raised. It is an unprepossessing milieu, this small, cultureless, coalmining town, and treated without close knowledge (as in Barbara Loden's film, *Wanda*), it can strike us as completely dehumanized. But because the author was truly of that world, and now no longer is, he is able to give us both the inside-out and the outside-in view of it, the latter chiefly from the mouth of Tom, whose nomadic life has taken him largely out of the town. But more important even than knowledge is sympathy: a recognition of the humanity of these beings—of that bit of depth even in shallowness of the stirrings of awareness even in ignorance—which makes the five dramatis personae persons as well as dramatic, worthy of our concern because we cannot quite hide from ourselves that, under the superego, we are their brothers.

Who are the players in this quintet? There is, first, the old coach, known only as Coach, who twenty years ago guided the other four (along with another boy, Martin) to victory in the Interstate High-School Basketball Championship. The big silver trophy, with all their names engraved on it, stands proudly displayed on a table in the coach's living room, the scene of the action. The coach was subsequently retired, pensioned off, for having

broken the jaw of a disrespectful student. But he and his boys—always accepting Martin—have annually come together to celebrate a victory that "gave this defeated town something to be proud of," as the coach put it, a victory on account of which a local cop will still tear up the coach's traffic tickets. The coach became the moral, social and political mentor of his boys for life, and that role is now his only *raison d'être*. It is his values that have governed their lives in one way or another—and why not, since he has abundantly drilled it into them that life and basketball are essentially identical. When one of the boys, Phil, says, "Politics is not basketball," the coach retorts, "Hell, yes. You get the crowd behind you and you can't lose. Everybody votes for a winner." And again: "Life is a game and I'm proud to say I played it with the best." And yet again: "You quit on the field, you'll quit in life. It's on the playing fields the wars are won." The pathos of this is that it is, in a sense, true; or, at least, widely believed to be so. Between the playing fields of Eton and the basketball court of Scranton there may not be that much difference, and no less a sage than Sir Walter Scott has assured us that "life is itself but a game of football." But between believing it and living it, there is a world of difference.

The boys are now in their late thirties and the coach warns them that this is the age of heart disease. (The irony is that they are not so much weak as faint of heart.) He wants them, as he always wanted them, "lean and mean." (Well, they are getting less and less lean, but they are not wanting in meanness.) There is, first, George, the mayor, who, with the coach's help, won his election by a margin of 32 votes against an old drunk. Now, however, he is up against an appealing, intelligent, honest man, Sharmen the high school principal. George is worried, but he covers it up with bravado: Sharmen is a Jew, and a relative of his, as the coach has ferreted out, was a Communist; that and Phil's money should get George re-elected.

Phil Romano is the "dumb dago" who inherited his father's strip-mining business and is the town's rich man. Ever since school days, the boys depended on Phil's car to get laid in; now he will provide the required campaign funds. But Phil has lost confidence in George, as has most of the rest of the town, and would gladly support Sharmen, if it were not for the latter's opposition to him as an ecological menace. Then there is James Daley, the junior-high-school principal, who first had to look after his long-dying father, then after his numerous brood, and now even after Tom, his dipsomaniac younger brother, whom he has had to fish out of the alcoholic wards of several cities. James is embittered by having been a constant, dutiful grind, sacrificing himself for others; he hopes for a belated recompense: success in politics. He is George's campaign manager, for which he is to be rewarded with the post of school superintendent. His ultimate ambition is Congress; but James, like George, is a loser, identifiable by the sweatiness under his collar.

More obviously a loser is Tom, the drunkard. Yet alcohol has turned him into one of those privileged jesters whom the coxcomb allows to utter sardonic truths intolerable from a sober, responsible person. Tom is a "happy" drinker who finds the truth in wine; but he is too weak to be set free by it, except to go off to other cities for his binges. And then James has to bring him back home. Tom uses the truth merely as sarcastic witticisms to be hurled at his fellows, or as innocent-sounding questions that lead them into self-incrimination. But revealing the mud around him does not elevate Tom: a

morass can't be used as a springboard; a morass sucks one in. Phil, too, with all his money, is a loser. "I like being rich, okay," he boasts. "I need money. I want two of everything. Cars, boats, women, etc., etc. Around expensive things I get a hard-on, turned on. I want them." But having two of everything is divisive and can be almost as frustrating and depleting as having none. Another time, Phil admits: "I'm so bored half the time, it's killing me." The two things that console him are driving his sports car at suicidal speeds, and girls, mostly very young ones. And something else: "Sit and replay the old games in my head . . . Sometimes I think that's the only thing I can still feel . . . that championship season . . . nothing matched it, nothing."

What Miller does is to let his characters interact and gradually reveal themselves. This is, of course, a time-honored basic technique of realistic drama, but Miller handles it with admirable assurance. The two pegs on which he hangs the action are the basketball reunion and the mayoral race, which permits the conversations to oscillate between the blissfully nostalgic retrospect of victory and the somewhat parlous prospect of collaborating on George's re-election. The coach looms as chief strategist in both contests, and the parallel between the game and life is thus forcefully posited. But now things begin to emerge. George is unmasked as an incompetent politically and even humanly: Marion, his wife, has been carrying on with Phil and, indeed, a good many others in town. It comes out, too, that Phil would rather support the Jew, Sharmen; that James, whom his own young son considers mediocre, would as soon run himself for mayor; that the boys are about to bring in outside experts to run George's campaign and so cut out James; that Tom is not a hopeful but a hopeless alcoholic; that the coach, who claims to have fully recovered from his operation, is actually in precarious health; and that Phil, with all his money, has very little to look forward to.

The game-life parallel begins to fall apart. In the game they were all one harmonious team; now they are squabbling, undermining, insulting, betraying, hitting and even threatening to shoot one another as the evening and the flow of liquor progresses. In this respect, *That Championship Season* is reminiscent of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, where a friendly get-together deteriorates into a drunken orgy of hate and self-hate; but Albee, despite some attempts at making his play transcendent through references to the decline of western culture, is still dealing essentially with private, personal problems. Miller's play, however, takes on a genuinely social character by capturing both the private and the public lives of a town as they intermingle and uneasily fuse. Thus, for example, although Miller ostensibly writes a play about men only, he deftly intimates what the town's women are like. There is George's wife, Marion, with her joyless promiscuity; Phil's Claire, who, in collaboration with her mother, lives the gay life of the rich bitch with continual travel and sex abroad; and James's Helen, who mass-produces babies and sacrifices her talent for painting to her monomaniacal motherhood. Then there was the more sophisticated Miss Morris, the music teacher, with whom the coach had a long-lasting relationship but whom he could not marry because she would not convert to Catholicism and because he had to take care of his old mother. There is even Mary, epileptic and retarded, with whom the boys used to have gang bangs, and who was recently brutally raped. As the feminine side of town comes gradually to life, it too seems to be populated with losers.

Is it, then, a case of the wonderful old basketball days versus the measly, bickering, unfulfilled days of adult life? No; Miller eventually brings life and the game together again in painful harmony. Tom reveals why Martin left town and never came back to these reunions: because the championship was won crookedly. There had been a superb Negro center on the opposing team, and Martin, on instructions from the coach, broke his ribs ("I told him to get tough under the boards" is how the coach euphemizes it), and that is how the trophy was captured. Now it all fits together: both life and basketball are a fraud, the one merely extending and perpetuating the other. Yet Miller does not allow things to become quite that simplistic, either. He makes the coach himself phrase his philosophy differently at different moments. There is the noble version, when the coach explains why he did not marry: "I never had the time. Teaching the game was not just a profession, it was a vocation. Like a priest. Devoted my life to excellence . . . superiority. . . . You, boys, are my real trophies, never forget that, never." Soon after, there comes a more equivocal version, a stoic-masochistic one: "Pain. The price is pain. Endurance. You endure pain to win, a law of life, no other way, none. The pain in my gut. It's been there all my life. It's good to hurt. The mind overcomes pain. You keep your marriage, George. Hold on to it." (It is, be it noted, in such incomplete sentences that much of the play's dialogue unfolds—the syntactic incompleteness becoming the objective correlative of the primitiveness and untidiness of these lives.) Finally, we get the third and ungarnished version: "Exploiting a man's weakness is the name of the game. He can't move to the left, you left him to death. Can't stop a hook, you hook away on him. Find his weak spot and go after it. Punish him with it. I drilled that into you a thousand times!" This is the coach's reply to Tom's accusation that they are smearing Sharmen with his long-dead Communist relative; forthwith, we see the application of this sports philosophy to the game of life. It is to be stated even more bluntly by the coach at the very last: "You have to hate to win, it takes hate to win." Dedication, pain, hate; it isn't any one of them but all three together. Two parts bad to one part good—that, alas, is the final truth about the games of basketball and life as they are played in Scranton, Pa., and just possibly elsewhere, too.

The game theory of life is, above all, immature, as the play copiously illustrates. For in stressing the team, the in-group, development is stunted in two directions: toward the single self, leading to selfreliance, self-cultivation, individualism; and toward public-spiritedness, ecumenism, world-citizenship. The coach and at least three of his boys are arrested at the level of parent and child servicing each other's physical and emotional needs—which the sports family, the coach-father and player-children, reiterates and prolongs into life. Miller lets us feel the weakness of unhappy families as paralleling the weakness of the in-group's morals and morale in contrast to those of Sharmen. Tom, as we have seen, does not really emancipate himself; only Martin has done that, but we do not know at what price.

This immaturity is neatly epitomized in various small but telling ways. I have mentioned the coach's need to look after his mother as his pretext for not marrying; more revealingly, Phil bursts out at one point: "You know the only woman I ever loved? . . . my mother, f—k the psychiatrists . . . my mother is the only . . . woman I ever knew. The rest are all c—ts." (Ellipses the author's. This line, by the way, was loudly applauded by the opening-night audience on Broadway.) These men are inveterate mother's boys.

Even more infantile is the unwillingness to accept as true what one doesn't want to believe. When Tom, mocking the coach's semiliterate eulogy of the Greek ideal, observes that the Greeks were homosexual, the coach explodes: "The Greeks homos? Not the Greeks, maybe the Romans but not the Greeks! Don't come around me with that liberal bulls—t. I won't listen." "I won't listen" is arguably the motto of the play: the boys will be boys and hear and believe only what they want to hear and believe. George lets himself be convinced that Marion did it with Phil only to raise money for her dear husband, James is convinced that he spilled the beans to George just so that the truth would bring them all together again, Phil is readily persuaded that James would never hurt him intentionally. And the play ends with the coach and his boys pulling together against Sharmen, against good government, progress and truth, against anyone who isn't one of them.

Miller is skillful with some important devices. He knows how to make a character or a situation gradually take on a different complexion through a casual remark here, a small revelation there. Thus Marion appears at first as a woman who committed a single indiscretion; but, by accretion of information and the change of the coach's way of talking about her, she ends up as a slut. James's dedication to his slowly dying father is spoken of in Act One as a great personal sacrifice, such as, the coach declares, not many would have made. In the second act, this sacrifice, which James uses as an excuse for his underachieving, earns only a hollow, rote approbation from George: "We all have great respect for you, James, you sacrificed, well, you know." By the third act, however, when James complains that his father never showed him the slightest respect in return for his sacrifice, the Coach lets him have it: "Whine. . . . Bitch and whine and blame your life on everybody. You got the eyes of a beggar." Meanwhile we also heard from Tom that "James never did anything out of . . . love. The word embarrasses him." For James is "just obedient. An obedient man. Press a button . . .". There it is again: obedience, a child's virtue; another great manly sacrifice was, like the coach's devotion to his mother, just infantile doing what one is told to do.

Feeling is immature in the boys. When George learns of his wife's infidelity, he cries out uncomprehendingly, "Marion. Unfaithful. I'm the Mayor, for Chrissakes!" This is pathetic—but for the shallowness, not the depth, of its feeling. What are feelings to George, anyway? When he wants to prove to the others that he has them, he exclaims: "I can understand . . . understand what makes a man take a gun, go up a tower, and start blowing people apart. I know the feeling. All smiles, huh? I have rage in me . . . I hate like everybody, hate . . . things." This is the horrible confirmation of the coach's "it takes hate to win"; yet it is also pathetic. Beautifully, Miller makes genuine pathos out of such inferior feelings, especially of that lame, evasive last word, "things": George does not even have the courage of his hates.

Another device Miller uses unobtrusively but compellingly is the parallel. The key revelation of the breaking of the black center's ribs is prefigured by an incident the coach recalls: "A communist came through here, 1930 maybe. Bad times. Poverty like a plague. . . . He came to organize. We broke his legs . . . with a two-by-four and sent him packing." So, too, Phil makes a semi-pitying, semi-contemptuous statement about his father, an ignorant immigrant who had only hard work and premature death out of the

fortune he amassed—and Phil doesn't realize how this parallels his own boring himself to death with his fast women, fast cars, and the fast demise he is courting.

What emerges is the picture of a society that makes a fetish out of success, but does not know what to do with it or even what it really is. It recognizes success, ultimately, only in material terms. However proudly the coach may talk about the Bach and Shakespeare he heard in his father's house, when he wants to prove the incontestability and value of that championship season he must reach for that prominently displayed trophy and exclaim: "I carved your names in silver, last forever, forever . . ." This echoes his earlier tribute to Teddy Roosevelt: "They carved that man's face in a mountain," which is typical also of the misinformation he frequently spreads. Concrete proof is what is wanted, and Miller deftly brings on a set of concrete, pragmatic evidences of championship with which to cement anew these perennial basketballers' unholy alliance.

First is a recording of the last few seconds of a broadcast of that championship game. The coach plays this record that is cracked with age and scratchy from constant replay, but it is evidence, concrete evidence. The boys listen to it raptly, then burst into the school song, and Phil and George even end up crying in each other's arms. Tangible or, at any rate, audible success. And sloppy sentimentality, with grass-roots America singing "Another victory for Fillmore"—a school named for a president whose face could at best be carved in a molehill.

After the aural, the ocular evidence. As the coach admonishes them, "No way a man can do it alone. Got to belong to something more than yourself," the boys proceed to arrange themselves around that twenty-year-old, ill-gotten trophy for the annual photograph. Even the unconverted Tom smiles for the coach's camera. Then the boys insist on taking a picture of the coach holding the cup. To make him smile, Tom, recalling the coach's earlier puzzlement by that word, encourages him ironically, "Say cunnilingus," but what dent can Thersites make in Achilles? The lights fade, and only a spotlight is left enshrining the coach. James, the photographer, announces, "I got you, Coach," and the remark is rich in subliminal meanings. The coach responds with the curtain line: "Yeah." The complacency of grass-roots America is engraved on that silver monosyllable.

Did the coach speak true when, early in the play, he declared, "We are the country, boys"? I think the characters are truly representative, created with sympathy, authentic. While Miller reprehends their outlook and behavior, he allows them, nevertheless, a fleeting self-cognizance, a bit of misdirected decency, some juvenile affection. Even as he makes us aware of their racism, crudeness, jejuneness, he also makes us feel the pity of this entrapment by the pettiness, barrenness, monotony of small-town existence. An author who can be both surgically probing and charitable, both muck-raking and forgiving, performs that marriage of incisiveness and generosity from which truths are born. Miller's accuracy as a reported is mirrored in the persuasive shabbiness of the language. The incomplete sentences, lacunas and aposiopeses, awkward repetitions, omnipresent cliches, all that invincible prosaism that can nevertheless stumble onto some sort of clumsy dignity—these and other traits of speech are instinct with

authenticity. Most interesting, perhaps, is Miller's avoidance of that folksy poetry with which writers tend to redeem the speech of plain people. That method is no more wrong than plain folk are incapable of unconscious poetry, yet I admire Miller's refusal to make use of it and still succeeding in making his characters fascinate us. He charges his dialogue with deliberate or inadvertent humor, self-revelation, conscious or unconscious, and the ominous ring of human hollowness. But, for all that, he does not encourage glib feelings of superiority in the audience: they recognize too much of themselves in these characters.

To one of them, however, Miller does grant a spurious poetry. Some of the coach's lines have a certain afflatus, a grandiose rhythm, obsessive refrains, and some fairly conventional but charismatic metaphors. This is true especially at the play's end, where the coach is given what amounts to a virtually two-page monologue. But the poetic heightening is undercut by a mixture of nostalgia for a past that was even more reactionary then the present and a grandiloquence that is more than faintly self-serving. The speech begins with a glowing evocation of the coach's father and the town as it was in his time; it ends with this prognostication about the mayoral race:

You won't lose, boys—because I won't let you lose. I'll whip your ass to the bone, drive you into the ground. Your soul belongs to God but your ass belongs to me, remember that one, yes sir, we can do it, we are going to win because we can't lose, dare not lose, won't lose, lose is not in our vocabulary! I shaped you, boys, never forget that. I ran you till the blisters busted, ran you right into perfection, bloody socks and all; you couldn't put on your jocks, awkward, all legs, afraid, a mistake a second. I made you winners. I made you winners.

There is a horrible beauty in that, after all.

But in general, along with the purposive leanness of the dialogue, there is even an almost complete absence of stage directions and instructions about how a line is to be read (e.g., anxiously, softly, etc.). Though there is nothing wrong with such hints to actors, directors and readers, there is also something fine and fastidious about refraining from them. It allows the director, actor or reader to come to his own conclusions and fill in his own details; yet the movement of a speech is always so clearly plotted that this leeway will not alter basic meanings or imperil communication.

In Joseph Papp's production, first mounted at the Public Theatre, then transferred to the Booth on Broadway, the production values are all of the utmost artistry. A. J. Antoon's staging is as meticulous as it is resourceful, creating an elaborate choreography of movements that first delight us by their unexpectedness, then delight us again by their absolute rightness. A drunk falls down a flight of stairs almost too spectacularly; an angry man goes out on the porch to simmer down, and repeatedly sticks his head back in through the window to hurl further invective at his offender; a bit of violence erupts so swiftly that it is over before it is really fathomed; all these events have an uncanny aroma of credibility, of really happening and happening for the first time. The rhythms of speech are cogently orchestrated, motion flows freely across the entire stage, and each entrance and exit has its particular shape and flavor.

The set, by Santo Loquasto, is right to the last detail. The tacky curtains and doilies, the Persian rugs and flowered wallpaper, the framed photographs of teams, the Grand Rapids mahogany furniture, the archetypal dowel post and balusters of the staircase spiraling to the second floor—all share in a fadedness and mustiness that no amount of cleaning or polishing could assuage. It is bourgeois respectability going to seed, but gallantly hanging on to every graspable vestige. The very layout of the room, with its unequal spaces to which further nooks and crannies adhere like pockmarks and warts, generates an aura of mixed coziness and embarrassment. It all exudes an uncertain yellowness, which it seems to have absorbed from bygone lives and is now breathing back into the current ones. Ian Calderon's lighting cannily contributes to this impression.

But the ultimate triumph of *That Championship Season* is in its performances. The five actors could scarcely be surpassed individually, but are even more astounding together. One might perhaps object that some look a little younger or older than their prescribed ages, but that is as nothing to their perfection in every other respect. As the mayor, Charles Durning gives off exaggerated self-assurance with every paper-thin smile and briskly tossed-off conviviality. Durning has a jerkiness of speech and angularity of motion that jut out incriminatingly from under the assumed fluidity. Even crushed with pain or maddened with wrath, he retains that puppet-like pettiness that makes him in equal measure ludicrous and pitiful. As James, the junior-high-school principal, Michael McGuire conveys magisterially that ingrained mediocrity sweatily straining to please. Even his pomposity has a thin, brittle tinkle in it, and his slightly squeaky voice seems to curl upward as it slowly gathers courage. At bay, he fights back with the inept but desperately serious anger of an aging tenor with a second-rate opera company in a grand, dramatic moment. As Tom, his younger, alcoholic brother—the softly sardonic voice of defeated reasonableness—Walter McGinn gives a magnificently balanced performance, not allowing the justness of his perceptions to blind us to his hopeless decay, and infusing his genuine likableness with a chilling sense of the sodden impotence beneath. His drunkard's titubations are flawless in their underlying somnambulistic agility, and his cascading down the stairs is splendid and alarming.

Richard A. Dysart's Coach is no less superb. Dysart conveys the maniacal aspects of the man without losing any of his equally relevant joviality. Though he can, at times, sound and look like a lesser Old Testament prophet, at other times, as when he pries esuriently into the details of Phil's intercourse with Marion, he becomes childlike, almost Puckish. Dysart wisely eschews the extremes of distastefulness or cuteness that the part could seduce one into, and makes a marvelously kaleidoscopic jumble out of probity and mean prejudice. He declines Phil's invitation to watch basketball on color TV: "They all shoot down at the basket. Not my game," and sees to it that the line sounds too funny to be moving; then continues with "it's not the white man's game," in tones of such disarmingly seriocomic distaste that the underlying nastiness hits us only a second or two later.

But the most dazzling presence on stage— *primus inter pares*—is Paul Sarvino as Phil. He makes the "dumb dago" shrewd, warm-hearted, ruthless, amiably oafish and coldly cynical all at once. I cannot begin to describe how the actor can convey that many conflicting and contradictory characteristics with a single slow expression, one quick

remark, or a solitary dismissing gesture—but he does. He makes you feel that everything comes from very deep in him, but also that he is just a huge, overgrown baby whose innermost core is right under the skin. He is so simple, so obvious, and then, suddenly, we don't know where this weeping has come from, or whether that inflection derives from silliness or great subtlety. And his comic timing is always exemplary. From all five actors we get ensemble acting of the highest order, which could hold its own against the finest acting aggregations of the world.

Jason Miller has written a first-rate commercial theatre piece. It is not quite profound or venturesome or novel enough to make it a work of art, but it is the very best example of the sort of play that keeps a commercial theatre meaningfully and honorably alive. If it cannot have a long life on Broadway, Broadway itself no longer deserves to live.

Source: John Simon, "That Championship Season," in *Hudson Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter, 1972-73, pp. 616-25.

Adaptations

That Championship Season was adapted as a film in 1982. This version was written and directed by Jason Miller. It starred Bruce Dern as George, Stacy Keach as James, Robert Mitchum as Coach, Martin Sheen as Tom, and Paul Sorvino as Phil.

A made-for-television version of *That Championship Season* was aired in 1999. This version was directed by Paul Sorvino. It featured Vincent D'Onofrio as Phil, Terry Kinney as James, Tony Shaloub, as George, Gary Sinise as Tom, and Paul Sorvino as Coach.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast Biff Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* with James Daley or one of the other former athletes in *That Championship Season*. How have their past athletic achievements affected their lives?

Research one of the historical figures mentioned by Coach (such as Joseph McCarthy) in *That Championship Season*. What kind of values does this figure hold? How do these values contrast them with the values of the 1970s? Why does Coach regard this person so highly?

Research the psychological techniques used by coaches to mold and inspire their teams. What do you think makes Coach successful? Is Coach a good coach in these terms?

Compare and contrast the stage play and film versions of *That Championship Season*. How do the different forms affect the story and characters? Is one better than the other? Why?

Compare and Contrast

1972: The musical *Grease* opens on Broadway. It is a nostalgic look at the 1950s, and a prime example of the 1970s obsession with nostalgia in entertainment.

Today: Grease has been revived for several years on Broadway. There is now nostalgia for past nostalgias.

1972: There is an enrollment decline in Catholic schools in favor of public institutions. Numerous parochial schools close, in part because of funding problems. Those that remained have problems finding staff. Many believe that a Catholic school does not offer as good an education as a public school.

Today: Public schools are under fire for not providing a solid education for students. Many parents turn to parochial schools, charter schools, and other private institutions, believing they offer a better education and better discipline.

1972: The Watergate break-in occurs. Five men break into the Democratic National Committee's offices to spy on the committee, an event covered- up by President Richard M. Nixon. This scandal eventually brings down Nixon and his government, creating a distrust of government. In 1974, Nixon resigns office before he can be impeached.

Today: President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, and his subsequent attempts to cover-up the relationship, leads to the impeachment of the president. Though Clinton is impeached, he is not voted out of office.

1972: Broadway theater is seen as in decline. All taboos have been broken, and plays like *That Championship Season* are seen as the hope for the near future. Soon, Broadway emerges stronger than ever with reality-based musicals like *A Chorus Line*.

Today: While Broadway's box office is not strong, the emphasis is on family entertainment with musical productions based on Disney movies. There are fewer dramas being produced.

What Do I Read Next?

No Exit, a play by Jean-Paul Sartre written in 1944, also takes place in one room and focuses on the personal revelations of a group of people.

Glengarry Glenn Ross is a play by David Mamet written in 1984. It features tight, realistic dialogue, all male characters, and a "need to succeed" theme.

Appointment in Samarra, a novel by John O'Hara published in 1934, concerns life in Pennsylvania. The novel focuses on the class system and the idea of success. It features strong use of the vernacular.

Nobody Hears a Broken Drum is a play written by Miller in 1970. It focuses on a group of Catholic characters in Pennsylvania and shares similar thematic concerns.

Rabbit, Run is a novel by John Updike published in 1960. Like many of the characters in *That Championship Season*, Harry Angstrom feels trapped by life.

Further Study

Amdur, Neil, "That Championship Season," in *Sporting News*, February 28, 1983, pp. 26-27, 29.

This article describes a championship basketball team from the same era and place (Scranton, Pennsylvania) featured in *That Championship Season*. The team may have inspired the play, or at least it shares many parallels with the fictional team.

"On the Set," in *The New Yorker*, May 20, 1972, pp. 32-33.

This article provides biographical information about Miller and background on the inspiration for and original productions of *That Championship Season*.

Peck, Ira, "From Unemployment Insurance to Championship," in *The New York Times*, May 21, 1972, section 2, pp. 1, 10.

This piece discusses Miller's background and describes the inspiration for *That Championship Season*.

Warren, William E., *Coaching and Winning*, Parker, 1988.

This book is a guide for coaches on how to motivate athletic teams to win.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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