

Robert Koch
Essay / *Tropic of Capricorn*
World History II, 5pm
Dr. Morris

Essay Tropic

“You may dream, if you dream alike.
But if you dream something different, you are not in America[...]
The moment you have a 'different' thought you cease to be an American.” (56)

By the accounts given in *Tropic of Capricorn*, Henry Miller was a saint. The Catholic church would vehemently deny the fact – Miller himself would no doubt deny it – but the opportunities he doled out, the second chances and hopeless defenses for those in need, changed lives. He was also a crook, a hedonist, and from time to time a madman. He was a rebel without a cause, and often a rebel without a clue. His moral compass resembled one owned by the fictional Capt. Jack Sparrow, and the map of his integrity would resemble nothing so much as a Jackson Pollack canvas in deep black, pure white, and puce (the puce stands for don't-give-a-fuck). In short, he was an industrial nation in microcosm; whatever he was, did, or said; he was, did or said too much of it.

In shorter, Miller was not unlike this introduction: excessive, metaphorical, and nonconformist to a fault. He was part of a new kind of society, one with few limits, but he explored those limits while searching for the parts of himself that described and defined morality, philosophy, and sexuality.

Miller, above all, was shameless. Everything he did was too much, and he felt no remorse because he felt society was full of liars, and he had to “shake hands and say how do you do to all these innocent looking fiends who were only waiting for me to sit down so they could suck my blood.” He would use his friends and acquaintances, borrowing or stealing whatever he pleased, stooping even to the point of stealing money from Maxie – someone of whom he'd claimed, “I was really bored to death... tolerating him only because he loaned me money readily and bought me things which I needed.” (209) – while standing over the casket of another friend.

Neither he nor his friends were blind to this behavior. He recounts a lecture from his friend MacGregor: “ ‘You don't think about your friends – until you're desperate. That's no way to live, *is it?* Say no and I'll give you a buck....’ Naturally I'd laugh and hold out my hand for the buck he had promised me. That would irritate him afresh.” (275) Miller knew that he didn't care about his friends for anything beyond their immediate use. He was Britain to his friends' India, right down to the stoic indifference and friendly parting of ways should his friends ever get sick of his exploitation.

The irony is rich, then, when examining his treatment of strangers. After a good dose of life, Miller knows that he wants to help people, and that to him, nothing else really matters. He took in cripples, idiots, and Jews – the dregs of society as Miller understood it. The racism he had learned and practiced as a youth had lost its venom. A casual comment would reveal his careless racism one moment, followed moments later by the staunch defense of people he'd been raised to hardly consider people. As a prime example, when a supervisor confronts him “...horrified, so he informed me confidentially, to think that I had employed a colored person as my secretary.... I told her quietly that if she were fired I would quit too.” (58)

At this point in his life, Miller is more like Christ than any other figure in history: sacrificing himself and his labor for the sake of people that deserved nothing from him, but stood everything to gain from his charity. Of a war veteran who had lost his senses and racked up considerable property damages, he recounts: “They sent him to me to give him the gate, but I didn't have the heart to fire him.... I ask to see the vice president himself and did you give the order I ask – *and why?* ... and if you don't like it, ... you can take the job, my job and his job and you can shove them up your ass – and like that I walk out on him.” (45-46)

The role of Christ didn't sit well with Miller, however; his philosophy examined these deeds and found them wanting. The seeds of his philosophical epiphany were sown by this discontent. “I was a brother to every man, and at the same time a traitor to myself. I made the most astounding sacrifices, only to find that they were of no value. Of what use was it to prove that I could be what was expected

of me when I did not want to be any of these things? ... Sometimes, ... I caught a glimpse of the nature of the jump which it was necessary to make. To jump clear of the clockwork – that was the liberating thought. To be something more, something *different*.... The story of man on earth bored me.” (331-332) Miller knew that he wasn't being *himself*, and this ate at his soul and drove him restless.

Restlessness was a common symptom for the population of the industrialized United States. Miller described the city as a useless place, where people are content to be discontent. Wondering what response he would get if he stopped and asked a passerby “*Why do you go on living the way you do?*”, he determines that “[t]he only conclusion I can come to is *that I am different*. And that's a very grave matter, view it how you will.” (103) This disillusionment with the answers modernity provided for life's great questions haunts him throughout his literary career.

Miller felt that he couldn't connect to others; his *different*-ness placed a communication barrier between his mind and the people around him. “To write intelligibly for them I would have been obliged first of all to kill something, secondly, to arrest time. I had just made the realization that life is indestructible and that there is no such thing as time, only the present. Did they expect me to deny a truth which it had taken me all of my life to catch a glimpse of?” (287) To bridge this gap, Henry Miller turned to sex.

From his first encounter onward, Miller is frank and descriptive about his sex drive. The reader isn't the only beneficiary of this openness; to the same Maxie he would later steal money from, he once stated bluntly, “... there's nothing to worry about but where in hell is Rita all the time, why don't you bring her along some time and let me take a good look at her quim.” (209) Since Rita was Maxie's sister, this did not go over very well, but in Miller's mind the issue was colored decidedly puce. He tried every type of relationship he could think of; casual, monogamous, one-night-stand, five-night-stand. He describes women who tackled him, laughed at him, pretended to sleep through the act, or sported mustaches. Additionally, he was with his lovers as he was with his friends: the closer the lover, the less he cared, a point embodied by the fact that a good deal of this activity went on right underneath

his wife's nose.

Even as a young man, however, he was devious and various: “And then one day it's the sad story – she's knocked up and what to do about it? I have to get a Jewboy to help me out, and he wants twenty-five bucks for the job and I've never seen twenty-five bucks in my life.... I give him five bucks on account and beat it to the Adirondacks for a couple of weeks. In the Adirondacks I meet a schoolteacher who's dying to take lessons. More velocity exercises, more condoms and conundrums.”

(256)

In the end, Miller's analysis of sex is simply dissatisfied. Though he describes copulation as a sacred act, a glowing tribute to mankind, or any other kind of wonderful, what rings most true is his question, “What's a fuck when what I want is love?” (224) As a novel, however, *Tropic of Capricorn* tells a different story; it closes with an account of Miller finally being in the company of his perfect woman, and living happily ever after, so far as the pages can tell. Nonetheless, the tale begs for disbelief. His account of unadulterated love has the ring of a false veneer to it, as though it is a happy ending added for the reader's sake: a little bit of murder and stasis, to write intelligibly for us. The device does its job: although this seems to be the climax of the story, the orchestral movements of self-understanding, existentialism, and societal critique that have swelled throughout the narrative seem suddenly to stop, dead and still.