

Prejudice transformed: arthur miller's focus



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Arthur Miller's 1945 novel *Focus*, there are many prejudicial attitudes that manifest themselves throughout the action; Miller clearly takes a stance that all of these anti-Semitic views are irrational. The setting of the novel is in mid-1940's Brooklyn. The main character, Lawrence Newman, works in an office and oversees the secretaries in the office essentially. He is praised by his boss, and everything seems to be going well for Newman until he buys a pair of glasses that seem stereotypically Jewish. Once Newman starts wearing these glasses, his whole world is turned upside down. Newman is anti-Semitic at the beginning of this novel, but this stance changes later on because of all the hardships he endures. Miller says that he thinks the reason people are anti-Semitic is because "they feel in themselves, a not-belonging" (Intro X), and Newman seems to fit this category until the end, when he sheds his cultural fears.

When Newman is first introduced in the novel, he is single, living with his mother, and has no real friends to speak of which leaves him very alone with only his thoughts. These thoughts leave him with nothing to do other than question his inadequacy. Newman worries about every little mistake that can be made throughout the day until he almost has breakdowns. He had an incident when riding the train and now when he gets on he says, "his face grew pinker at the memory of that moment. His blood began to pump rapidly" and this shows that he is scared of everything in life. This is understandable though because he has no one to talk over things with. He could tell his mother, but she is growing old, and he should not bother her with these kinds of problems. Instead, Newman is forced to deal with his inadequacies in other forms like taking out anger on other cultural groups.

Newman eventually meets a girl that he comes to like as more than a friend and she helps him break through some of his anti-Semitism, but he still is unable to figure it all out. When Newman first meets Gertrude Hart, she is looking for a job at his first place of work. Newman thinks that she looks Jewish because of the way she dresses, and so does his boss. Newman does not hire her solely on the fact that she sort of dresses like a Jewish person might and she sounds educated like a Jewish person might. Gertrude notices that this is why she is not being hired, and she even says to Newman that “They ought to hang yiz!” (34) because she thinks he is Jewish while still passing judgment onto her.

When they meet again, Newman is the one looking for a job, and she is the one who has a job. Fortunately, she forgives Newman, and they start going out on dates. Newman and Gertrude eventually move in together and get married, and he finally has someone to help with his loneliness. In reality, though, Newman is so worried about being the perfect husband that he becomes even more stressed and left to deal with his thoughts while everyone around him is starting to think he is Jewish. He does have some moments of clarity because during his time with Gertrude he starts to also talk to Finkelstein and figure some things out. Newman still really believes though that Finkelstein is a lower class than he because of certain stereotypes. Yet once Newman creates a real bond with Finkelstein he is able to truly overcome his anti-Semitism. The neighbors start to turn over his trash cans and they also kick Newman out of the Christian Front meeting that his friend Fred told him he should come to. When the Christian Front group tries to attack Newman and Gertrude, Mr. Finkelstein saves them with

the baseball bats, and Newman starts to feel a bond with Finkelstein. Even Gertrude ran away to Fred while Newman was getting attacked and she seemed to be in no hurry to save the men. The realization comes to Newman after the fight when he thinks to himself " nothing strange came to him, it was a human, ordinary room" (212) that Finkelstein lives in. This shows Newman accepts that Jewish people are just as normal as he is and he is ready to help Finkelstein and himself by going to the police station and reporting the incident to the cops. Newman finally finds someone who he feels a deep down connection with and because of this he is able to shed his anti-Semitic views once and for all. Arthur Miller clearly builds Newman's character to help show how prejudice can be formed and also overcome.

Throughout most of the novel Newman is very anti-Semitic and he has a very stereotypical attitude towards all Jewish people. Once he is labeled as Jewish by his friends and colleagues Newman starts to see everything in a new light. Newman starts out as a very lonely man who questions his every thought and he also has no one to talk to his problems about. This is what creates most of his problems because, as Miller states in his introduction to the novel, the loneliness creates Newman's prejudice. Newman forms a bond and friendship with Finkelstein, and his whole life and his views are completely changed after he does so. This bond of friendship gives him some insight to the real Jewish community and also gives Newman someone in which he can confide in. In the end Newman winds up helping the Jewish community by reporting the attack on him even though he is offered other ways out by Fred. Newman made this decision because he knew he had a real friend in Finkelstein and he had to help both of them. The fellowship

between Newman and Finkelstein helped Newman overcome his anti-Semitism and lead a more fulfilling life.