



## “All My Sons”- The Tragic Conflict between Family Loyalties and Social Responsibilities

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**Abstract.** The play “All My Sons” takes its title from the swan-song of Joe Keller, the tragic character in the play. His sense of guilt drives him to suicide, and before taking his life, he refers to his son Larry’s statement that he was ending his life to make amends for the twenty-one pilots, who met their end by using the cracked cylinder heads dispatched from the factory of Joe Keller. Larry’s death brings home to Joe the truth that not only Larry but also those twenty-one pilots were his sons. The major theme of “All My Sons” is the tragic conflict between family loyalties and the social responsibility. Joe Keller is an ordinary fair-to medium individual whose love for his family is boundless. Being an uneducated man, not given to much reading, he lives in a narrow world consisting of his family and a few neighbors. A confusion of values overwhelms his mind, for he is obsessed with his own happiness and of those he loves, but his son Chris speaks of the universe of people to which he has the responsibility. His personal tragedy triggers from his adherence to the American value system which is antagonistic to social welfare.

**Keywords:** self-deception, betrayal, guilt, American Dream, responsibility

### 1. INTRODUCTION

All My Sons, Arthur Miller's first commercially successful play, opened at the Coronet Theatre in New York on January 29, 1947. It ran for 328 performances and garnered important critical acclaim for the dramatist, winning the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

Miller's earlier play, The Man Who Had All the Luck (1944), had not done well and had quickly closed; therefore, at the time All My Sons opened, Miller's reputation as a writer was based almost solely on Focus (1945), his lauded novel about anti-Semitism. All My Sons is now regarded as the first of Miller's major plays. The work also greatly helped the career of Elia Kazan, who had first won accolades for his direction of Thornton Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth in 1942 and after directing All My Sons would continue to work with the plays of both Miller and Tennessee Williams to produce both legendary stage productions and important films. Most of the reviews appearing in the major newspapers and magazines on All My Sons (1947) were rather favorable, which is quite understandable considering that the play vividly depicts the psychological aspects of the United States during and immediately after the Second World War in a realistic setting.

In fact, it is impossible to understand the problems Joe and Chris Keller, the father and the son, get involved in without the background of the war. The moral or ethical issue the play presents through the conflict between Joe, a practical-minded realist and Chris, a militant idealist, or even Larry, another son not appearing on the stage, becomes apparent with the very background of the war, per se.

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## 2. ARTHUR MILLER'S BIOGRAPHY

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in New York City. He spent his early years in comfortable circumstances, until his father, Isidore, a prosperous manufacturer, lost his wealth in the economic devastation of the Great Depression. After completing high school, Miller had to take a job in a Manhattan warehouse. He had not been much of a student, but after reading Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* he decided that he was destined to become a writer. He had trouble getting into college but was eventually accepted at the University of Michigan, where he began his apprenticeship as a writer and won several student awards for his work. After college he returned to New York and worked briefly as a radio script writer, then tried his hand at writing for the stage commercially. His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), closed after only four performances, but it did win a Theater Guild award and revealed the young writer's potential. He had more success with *Focus* (1945), a novel dealing with anti-Semitism. In fact, at the time he wrote *All My Sons* (1947), his first dramatic hit, he was better known as a writer of fiction than as a playwright.

*All My Sons* established Miller's standing as a bright and extremely talented dramatist. The play had a good run and won Miller his first New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Even the least favorable commentators recognized the playwright's great promise. Miller followed *All My Sons* with three of his most critically and commercially successful plays: *Death of Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). In these works, Miller attempted to show that tragedy could be written about ordinary people struggling to maintain personal dignity at critical moments in their lives. With these plays, Miller joined Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams in what in the post-World War II years was generally recognized as the great triumvirate of the American theater.

Miller, a political leftist, gained some notoriety in the 1950s when he refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee and was held in contempt of Congress. From this experience he found thematic material for one of his most famous and controversial plays, *The Crucible*, which focuses on the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. After the 1955 production of *A View from the Bridge*, Miller took a nine-year hiatus from play-writing. In the interim, Miller married and divorced the famous actress, Marilyn Monroe. He did adapt one of his stories, *The Misfits* as a screen vehicle for his celebrated wife but did not complete another Broadway play until 1964, when both *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* were produced. The former play, considered Miller's most experimental play, is also his darkest work, with many autobiographical parallels. His last Broadway success was *The Price*, produced in 1968. After his next play, *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972), failed on Broadway, Miller stopped premiering works in New York. He continued to write plays, and enjoyed some success, but nothing that matched that of his earliest works. Many of his later plays were short one-act plays and works comprised of sketches or vignettes.

His greatest triumphs remain *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. Both have been revived with great success. In 1999, for example, the New York production of *Death of a Salesman* garnered four Tony awards, including one for best revival and one for best direction. At the age of eighty-four, Miller was also presented with a special, lifetime achievement award for his great contributions to the American theater.

It was when Miller happened to read Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, presuming it was a sort of detective story in his high school days, that he began to take an interest in the subject of the father-son conflict.

*I think now it was because of the father and conflict, but something more. It is always probing beyond its particular scenes and characters for the hidden laws, for the place where the gods ruminant and decide, for the rock upon which one may stand without illusion, a free man.*

*Yet the characters appear liberated from any systematic causation.*

This shows us that Miller not only learned the father-son conflict in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but also found what he called “the hidden laws,” upon which the conflict is actually based at a deeper level. It could be said here that what Miller intended in the series of his plays is to identify “the hidden laws” by setting the father-son conflict as a central issue or theme.

### 3. JOE KELLER: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

First of all, what kind of person is Joe Keller? He is a so-called “self-made man.” He is also a “rags-to-riches” type of man who has worked pretty hard and become a successful owner of a factory. The hardships he has gone through are not mentioned in detail in the play, but we can imagine them from what he says. He tells his wife, Kate, about Chris, “I should put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and make him earn his keep. Then he’d know how a buck is made in this world.” This clearly shows how he started his independent life away from home when he was very young. The following also tells us how he has established his present position through difficulties. “You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?” (115). In this scene he is explaining to Chris why he would not like to give up his factory which he has kept forty long years despite the faulty cylinders the factory produced and shipped to the armed forces.

Another evidence of Joe’s being a self-made man is found in his night-school education which was not good enough to read more than classified ads in the newspapers. Actually, social conditions in the United States during World War II were as follows: In February, 1941 the United States entered a state of war to a full extent. Production of arms was encouraged as much as any available resources could be used. How much and how soon they can produce is the prime question for any factory. Competing for volume and speed fits the American’s character. Also, companies in the war munitions industry were in harsh competition. Joe’s following words indicate the situation:

*Who worked for nothin’ in that war? When they work for nothin’, I’ll work for nothin’. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It’s dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it’s nickels and dimes, what’s clean? (125)*

What Chris found out is the “solidarity” and “responsibility” between man and man.

Those are noble ideas which Chris learned in his war situations. When he dared apply them to actual society, however, problems occurred. To Chris who had this war experience, it is quite natural that he found actual society “incredible.”

*And then I came home and it was incredible, I - there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a - bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt - what you said - ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you’ve got to know that it came out of the love a man have for a man, you’ve got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there’s blood on it. I didn’t want to take any of it. And I guess that included you. (85)*

As we have already seen, the war experience has made Chris aware of his ego or self. However, his experience was gained in an unordinary situation and it is not applicable to the realities of everyday life. In a way, Chris’ tragedy lies in the fact that he has not realized this.

The feeling of “solidarity” and the sense of “responsibility” he learned in the war has its true meaning in the army where military cooperation and union count as a harmonious whole. In the dog-eat-dog American society of the war industry during the war, those words didn’t mean anything. Naturally Chris can never get along with Joe because of his unrealistic ideas.

*I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world - the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in this world? What the hell are you? (116)*

Richard L. Loughlin views *All My Sons* as a moral play dealing with biblical themes such as “brotherhood” and “love of one’s neighbor,” and also as a Greek drama.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation puts the play in the Western tradition and would be a good clue to think about its universality. To begin with, he asks why Miller picked “*All My Sons*” as a title and explains the relationship between the play and the biblical themes: “What did he [Miller] hope to accomplish by calling it *All My Sons*?”

Obviously, he is preaching brotherhood, using the Old Testament as both his text and his texture.”

Miller apparently chose the title from Joe’s words at the end of Act III, “Sure, he [Larry] was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were” (126). Joe expresses these words after he learns of the suicide of the missing Larry and the motivation behind it. He was too concerned about his family to pay attention to the outside world. Those words imply the brotherly love taught in the Bible. It is revealed that Larry sent the following letter to Ann just before his flight to his death.

*It is impossible to put down the things I feel. But I've got to tell you something. Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel - I can't bear to live any more. Last night I circled the base for twenty minutes before I could bring myself in. How could he have done that? Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business..... I don't know how to tell you what I feel. .... I can't face anybody. .... I'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me missing. If they do, I want you to know that you musn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him. (125-26)*

Joe firmly believes that Larry is the one who has understood Joe’s situation, but he is shocked to learn that Larry committed suicide due to his wrongdoing and this led Joe to his suicide.

The brotherly love recognized by Joe at the end of the play is one of the major biblical themes regarding two brothers in the Old Testament. The story goes like this: Cain, the older brother who is a farmer, and the younger one, Abel who is a shepherd, gave offerings to God and God preferred Abel’s. Cain became disappointed and envious toward Abel, and killed him despite God’s warning. This is the first murder the humans had ever committed. “Am I a keeper of my brother?” is considered a typical example of selfishness seeking one’s own benefits, “the root of all evils.” Cain and Abel represent humanity in general and the Bible here teaches that it’s precious for us to love each other like brothers.

This is exactly what Chris learned from his comrades in the battlefields and reminds us of “solidarity” and “responsibility.” Loughlin explains the relationship between *All My Sons* and the Old Testament. In Miller’s modern version and underscoring of the biblical story, Joe is Cain; Larry and the twenty-one P40 pilots who have lost their lives are Abel. Chris elicits from Joe the realization that all men are his sons, that there are no missing links in the chain of humanity. In this respect, *All My Sons* is a morality play, because each of us is Everyman.

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What we should take note here is that Loughlin regards *All My Sons* as a modern “morality” play. Joe committed a crime out of his selfish motives, saying he did it all for his family. Humanity could not escape from ‘original sin’ and in that sense he is not different from anybody, and Joe is ‘Everyman.’ That’s Loughlin’s point. As we have already seen, this interpretation is based on Western thought and should be highly appreciated.

Loughlin’s second point is the relationship between *All My Sons* and the Greek tragedies, another traditional observation. In the first place, he discusses the so-called traditional three units of action, time, and place in the play.

*Although a modern, naturalistic play, All My Sons is rather traditional in theme and in some other respects. It observes what are called the unities. Aristotle said that unity of action occurs when the parts are “so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole.” All My Sons is solidly structured. It also satisfies the unity of time, because it unfolds over a brief period of time; the unity of place, because the action occurs in Joe Keller’s back yard.*

Steve R. Centola regards *All My Sons* as a play of “bad faith.” By “bad faith” he means selfishness, self-interestedness, irresponsibility. According to this critique, almost all of the characters including Larry and some minor characters lend dramatic credence to Miller’s ideas on bad faith. Centola especially discusses Miller’s intention concerning his portrayal of Joe’s downfall:

*With his portrayal of Joe Keller’s downfall, Miller suggests that every individual has the power to make free choices and the obligation to convert those choices into responsible actions toward society. When one refuses to accept his freedom and denies his responsibility to society, he lives in bad faith. All My Sons shows the danger of such bad faith by exploding what Miller calls the “exclusiveness” of private life in America.*

In fact, Joe as well as others have failed to transform guilt into responsibility, even though they had a chance to. Centola concludes: “The collapse of the Keller family is not just a private affair; it is emblematic of a deeper, broader disintegration of humanistic values that could spell disaster to a world trapped in its own bad faith.”<sup>38</sup> We can take this as proof that *All My Sons* is a “universal” play.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Arthur Miller’s plays depict the human tendency of self-deception, betrayal and guilt which leads to the deterioration and the collapse of human values. According to Miller, the American Dream creates false hopes that prevent people from being proud of what they have accomplished to make their lives better than they would be elsewhere, and eventually fail at achieving anything.

Keller tries to convince himself that the people who used to call him “Murderer” (I, 31) are the same who play with him: “Every Saturday night the whole gang is playin’ poker in this arbor.

All the ones who yelled murderer takin’ my money now.” (I, 31) Joe Keller, an escapist, wants to run away from reality. To safeguard himself, he has prepared around him a web of his false assumptions. He asserts that the power of money makes people forget his indulgence in

crime.

The truth seems surrendered to almighty money. The family is his only justification for the crime he has committed. He is able to stave off guilt by telling Chris and Kate and, ultimately, himself, that he only did it for the family: “Chris... Chris, I did it for you...For you! A business for you.” (I, 15) And “I’m his father and he’s my son, and if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head!”(III, 83) He is willing to put all other ethics aside for the integrity of taking care of the family, and he lies and cheats by covering up the cracked airplane parts. Joe indicates this fact: “What could I do! I’m in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you’re out of business ...”. (II, 67) The only outside world for Keller is his business. Therefore, he is reflecting the values of this world. The business world does not have human values. Thus Miller puts part of blame for Keller’s action on the society and business world whose values are fake. In this kind of world, human values are discarded.

American society which recognizes and honors the material success attained by betraying the character-ethic.

Chris Keller is responsible for his family’s dilemma. The idealistic youth who energetically professes to detest dishonesty is as guilty as his parents for attempting to hide from reality.

Though he persists in pushing his mother toward an acceptance of his brother’s death, he does so for his own selfish reasons and not because he thinks it is in her best interest to be able to face reality. Likewise, even though he adopts a high moral tone and energetically indicts his father for his criminal irresponsibility, Chris knows that his words ring hollow because he has long suspected his father’s guilt but deliberately avoided confronting the truth— again for purely selfish motives: “I suspected my father and I did nothing about it.” (III, 87) Ann Deever suspects Keller’s guilt and betrayal because of the letter she received from Larry before his suicide; however, she refrains from impeaching Keller until she feels compelled to do so in order to save her relationship with Chris. Her motives are selfish, governed primarily by a fundamental drive for self-preservation.

Kate knows very well her husband’s deed. When Joe Keller plays a game with the neighbor’s children, Kate warns him that he must stop “the whole jail business!”, Joe replies, “What have I got to hide?” (II, 74) This indicates that there is something to hide. According to Stephen Centolla, Joe and Kate are “uncomfortable together because of their shared guilt and shame.”

One is over-confident and the other is anxious. Joe and his wife live in fear of bad news, About their son and about the crime they have conspired to deny, the two inevitable connected in their minds. All the characters are drawn together by love, but that love becomes the source of a certain corruption.

Harold Clurman blames Kate Keller for being the “the villain in the Keller’s home.” She is fully aware of Joe’s crime from the very start, but she never openly speaks of it in order to keep “her brood safe and her home undisturbed.” Instead of encouraging her husband to face his responsibilities honestly, she protects him against prosecution by defending Joe and tells George that Joe was staying home from work on the day the cracked engine heads were shipped out.

On the other hand, Kate denies her son’s death by desperately trying to freeze the moment of Larry’s disappearance. In this way, it is her silence and her selfishness that partly causes Steve Deever’s imprisonment and his family’s breakup. Therefore, she is also guilty by being an accomplice in the crime, while Joe commits it. Accordingly, “the play shows that Kate, as much as Joe, destroyed George’s family” and “she [Kate] must be condemned along with Keller because of her active cooperation with the crime” In her mind, Kate connects Joe’s criminal act with the absence of their son. Joe has been morally misled by the ‘mores’ of an abhorrent society, a society that Chris comes to describe as “the land of the great big dogs.” (III, 87)

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Keller has been taught that it is the winner who continues to play the game and that society can turn a blind eye to moral concerns so long as the production line keeps rolling, this is the essence of capitalism. In *All My Sons*, Miller makes it clear that society in general values money and profit more than human life.

The play is a bitter criticism of the popularly accepted American values of success. Miller's characters illustrate that good and evil are inextricably mixed in this world. Man is a creature of circumstances, and he cannot, therefore, give a wide birth to evil. A man reaches the acme of civilized life by recognition of his responsibility to the universe.

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