



The Inner And Outer World: A Metaphorical Exploration In Arthur Miller's All My Sons Through The Allegorized Character Of Joe Keller

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Abstract: Arthur Miller (1915-2005), a celebrated dramatist of 20th-century American literature, is a distinguished and profound social critic of contemporary social evils. Through his moralistic play, All My Sons, Miller has conveyed the theme of social responsibility through the allegorized tragic protagonist, Joe Keller, the killer of 21 American pilots. Miller emphasizes that one should not forfeit or sell one's conscience for personal and family benefit. Miller has investigated the philosophy of a man, Joe Keller, a member of the representative American everyman, as a dishonest and self-centered manufacturer selling his ethics for worldly consideration, who puts his responsibilities above those of society. Joe considers that his rightful position in his society is to be a good husband and a good father. Yet, he commits an awful offense against the outer world. His perverted priorities blind his conscience and weaken his judgment. The fact cannot be denied that "Chris, a man can't be Jesus in this world", but he must preserve some ethical values that secure society.

Keywords: Self-realization, dishonesty, identity crisis, allegory, and tragedy.

Born in 1915 in New York City, Arthur Miller is one of the established and famed international dramatists of America. All My Sons, Miller's Broadway play, opened on January 29, 1947. The play was graced with the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the same year and had a run of 328 performances. The play's social topicality now appears dated. Miller creates of All My Sons a thesis drama in which he insists upon a liability and responsibility towards society as a whole. In technique and structures, Miller's elegant play, All My Sons displays the inspiration of Ibsen. The play discovers the themes of materialism, wartime profiteering, and man's relationship and compulsion to society above and beyond the concerns of his family circle.

Miller has conveyed his meaning and the gist of the play through actions. While the play concentrates on past events such as Larry's death and Joe's offense, these actions let the characters center on the matter Miller

attempted to discover —man's responsibility to man. Miller's principles towards society can be studied through Chris, an icon of honesty and virtue, and emphasized in his argument with Joe about the responsibility of a person towards others. Joe only shoulders the responsibility with his family when he places their happiness and safety ahead of society. We witness that the climax of the play takes place when Joe comprehends his commitment to society, an understanding dramatically proclaimed by his suicide at the end of the play. In this way, Miller clearly explains the play's morality through actions.

Joe Keller, a wicked man who avoids prosecution by placing the entire blame on his partner, is a negative example of a way to live in peace and harmony with others. His choices—to supply the faulty air cylinders and to commit suicide are both antisocial rather than social. Nor does Miller truly apply his plays to illustrate the consequences in terms of their result on society. In making a warm, friendly milieu, in which each neighbor confesses that he knew Joe was guilty, he seems to be showing Joe getting away with his deed, with society accepting his crime. The neighbors imply that they disapprove, but they continue to live peacefully with Joe, thus contradicting Miller's basic beliefs. Richard A. Cassel sees society in the play in a different light.

“All My Sons leaves us with the view that the world is zoo where man lives like an animal until he learns to accept his responsibility to others.”¹

Despite the perplexities of alternatives and principles, Miller makes his idealistic point. The crux of the discussion, if not of the action, is Joe's failure to realize his connection with others in the world. Early in the play, Chris informs Ann about the necessity of responsibility for all men. When Joe's crime is exposed, we see the disapproval of his family, and when the audiences come to know Larry's letter and learn that the war has also brought him a belief in man's responsibility to man, the message is clear. Joe's death only highlights the terror of his consciousness of his responsibility for the lives of twenty-one American pilots.

Despite this horror, there is no sense that the world is not a home. To contrast the horror of Joe's sin, Miller deliberately creates the neighborhood which symbolizes that the world is a friendly place. Joe's neighbors admire and accept him despite their acquaintance of his fault. The world becomes a home for Joe Keller, and his dishonesty allows him to continue to enjoy that world.

We examine that Joe's dignity as a father is crushed by the iron necessities of economics as he determinedly follows his instincts to live in financial ruin. The catastrophe in the play turns on the disclosure that Joe Keller intentionally ships an order of faulty airplane parts but he lets his colleague take the responsibility. As a self-centered manufacturer, Keller ships the fractured cylinder heads to protect his business. His argument, chiefly when challenged by Chris, is that he follows the law of supply and demand, the bloodthirsty nature of business:

“I’m in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you’re out of business, you got a process, the process don’t work you’re out of business...” (All My Sons, p.58)

Joe argues that his main intention in shipping the defective cylinders is for his family’s benefits and welfare. We can quote here Paul Blumberg to make the point more clear. He emphasizes in *Work as Alienation* in the Plays of Arthur Miller that Joe is:

“Not a selfish, disagreeable or greedy industrialist; he is, really, an ignorant, good natured and kindly fool, whose love for his wife and family is genuine and unselfish.”²

Therefore, he informs Chris that he knowingly sold the damaged cylinder heads “for you, a business for you!”(All My Sons, p.59)

Opposing to Ruby Coon’s claim that Joe Keller is a villain,³ All My Sons stresses Joe’s sense of family and his longing to defend and love his family. In fact, Joe Keller underscores his identity as a father, not on his business achievement. When Kate reminds him that Chris considers there is “something bigger than the family.” Joe Keller’s response is that:

“Nothin’s bigger than that. And you’re goin’ to tell him, you understand? I’m his father and he’s my son, if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head.”
(All My Sons, p.63)

Chris is appropriately of the view that there is “something bigger than that”—the country, the world, humanity. The clash between Chris and his father results from a moral dissimilarity between them. As Allan Lewis asserts, the father and son represent different worlds⁴—Joe symbolizes a limited view of family relationships while Chris represents the extended view of brotherhood, a friendship that enabled his own soldiers to sacrifice their lives for one another and for their country.

A disappointed Joe Keller finally acknowledges that “Sure, he (Larry) was my son. But I think to him (Chris) they were all my sons. And I guess they were.” After this confession, Joe commits suicide. We learn that Joe Keller finally comes to terms with a larger and more encompassing identity as a father. As Paul Blumberg explains Joe Keller’s dogged pursuits of business success alienates him from both his work and the larger society around.⁵ He understood the rigor of the marketplace and lost his family because he followed its dictates.⁶ Although Joe Keller begins with a narrow sense of the world of the family, he finally recognizes that the world extends beyond the limits of his four walls and his identity as a father must be carried on beyond the limits of the biological proscriptions of fatherhood into the broader area.

All My Sons is a realistic play representing the theme that a man must recognize his moral responsibility to the world outside his home as well as in his own home.”⁷ Joe Keller, a common man tragic hero, is brought before a choice between an aesthetic life in quest of aristocratic delight and a principled life, which is achieved by a self-determined acceptance of guilt and duty.

The tragic elements in All My Sons occur due to Joe's son, Chris Keller. We find a hidden clash between the fondness of devotion he has for his father and his notion of honesty and worldwide brotherhood which the father offends. The characters in the play, however, survive mostly to demonstrate the melancholic consequences of a catastrophe caused by a self-centered and money-oriented society that values economic success as it exhibits underlying moral law. At the end of the play, Joe Keller learns that all the pilots who were killed merely by his self-seeking misdeed were equally his dear sons as Larry and Chris for whom he cherishes his business.

There are critics of Marxist or Para-Marxist opinions who attempt to elucidate the guilty consciousness of the wartime profiteer in All My Sons in terms of sociological categories of work alienation. In a brilliant study of the realistic social vision in Miller's tragedies, Raymond Williams explains that Joe Keller's alienated consciousness is essentially derived from the false values of his society.⁸ Joe's philosophy was in one sense created for him by the callous business world of which he is a part. In All My Sons as in Death of a Salesman, Miller criticizes an industrial society with its worship of strange gods. In a sociological inquiry into the Marxist theme of work alienation in Miller's work, Blumberg briefly brings out Joe's estrangement from his work and the larger society around him. Blumberg comments that Joe's specific act of crime could be traced back in part to his relationship to his work, which encouraged an unrestrained and boundless individualism, a social indifference, and a measuring of values in terms of personal profit and loss, rather than in terms of wider social values.⁹ In the plays that belong to the first half of Miller's career, society is basically seen to be an image-making machine, and the individual or the main character in the plays is made either accept or militantly reject the false images that society forces upon him. Joe Keller, like Willy Loman, is a pathetic victim of the boundless influence of the culture of American capitalism.

Miller's social criticism in All My Sons does not make coverage of a sense of hope for the future; the universal echoes of the title of the play involve a message of human brotherhood and love. The title of the play catches the idea of one-worldism which was popular in America in the war years. The notion that the individual does owe a sense of allegiance to society at large, that he is, as Chris says in the play responsible to “a universe of people” which formed part of the American ethos ever since the days of Emersonian transcendentalism-received an extra-accent during the war years.

In *All My Sons*, Miller introduces a tragic hero, Joe Keller, an ordinary person, who represents the American way of life. He does not intend to become a scapegoat. He is "a man among men." (*All My Sons*, p.6) In his society, Joe gains admiration and respect, chiefly from his family members for whom he worked hard throughout his life. He wants his family members to be thankful for him. He defends his wife's irrational faith that Larry is alive. He considers Chris Keller his dear and loving son for whom he has developed his business based on foul means and dishonesty. But Chris's idealistic set of principles does not bring him money, nor does it open doors to his capitalistic society. It is beyond Joe's understanding that Chris puts public obligations before private values that trumps all others, especially love between father and son. Chris is oblivious to the comforts in life because he grew up with them and never bothered to stop and ask where they came from.

Joe Keller represents immorality and corruption in the play. Similar to his neighbors and the society at large, he is a man with ordinary, limited devotion and faithfulness, who might have lived a long and happy life if he had not committed an unforgivable crime. Throughout the play, the readers know about the ideology of Joe Keller who thinks that there is nothing deceitful in an appeal to the two principles upon which he builds up his life: the value of individual effort and the holiness of family devotion born of love. His second plea broadens beyond the individual and the family but is still defined by the inner circle. Joe cries to his son "You want me to go to jail? If you want to go, say so." (*All My Sons*, p.67) It is an appeal to a world beyond family but still lacking reliable human relationships, a world in which practicality has created its particular brand of morality. Joe's trouble is not incapability to distinguish between right and wrong. Although his family represents an absolute right for him, his comments to Chris, as mentioned above, clearly highlight his recognition that his actions on behalf of his wife and son were wrong. But he takes refuge in numbers, emphasizing that the only difference between his situation and thousands of similar ones lies in the gravity and the publicity of the consequences. Joe Keller does not claim moral goodness for his actions: he maintains family devotion as an unshakable end, and social convenience for the less defensible means.

Joe Keller is a victim and a victimizer. His society has inculcated phony morals in him to the extent that these allow him to justify his behavior. Society is partially responsible for his actions but Joe commits a crime against society also. Because of his extreme and narrow allegiance to his family, he commits a crime against the outer world. To look after those who are dear to him he forfeits others. The fascination of *All My Sons* lies exactly in its dramatization, not of good versus evil, but of a conflict between two forces, family and society, each of which is naturally good. The tragedy of Joe Keller's life is that a basically decent motivation leads to the catastrophe. The irony of the play is that his crime against the outside world ultimately becomes a crime against his own family as well, and in destroying those to whom he believes himself isolated, he finally destroys those to whom he is most strongly bound.

Kate Keller comes to realize the ideology of both of her sons through a letter written to Larry's beloved, Ann. The disclosure that Larry sacrificed himself for his country because he was unable to live with the dishonor and disgrace that his father had cast on the family both shocks and sobers Keller. He realizes that human morality does not permit any human being to become a predator. Larry in his letter, and Chris in his verbal confrontation with Joe, address their father's responsibility not only to his family but also to society at large. When Keller realizes the reality of both of his sons' worldviews he can understand how different his views are. Can he see all American soldiers as his sons? He approves and nods his head in bewilderment and whispers, "And I guess they were, I guess they were" (All My Sons, p. 68).

Steven Centola is of the view that "Keller prefers to see himself as a victim of others. Instead of acknowledging his complicity in the crime that sends pilots to their deaths, he lies about his involvement and diminishes personal culpability. He blinds himself to the impulses that make him a danger to himself as well as to others".¹⁰ Centola underlines the importance of the past, stating: "The past is always present and cannot be ignored, forgotten, or denied."

Joe's broken utterance "I guess" is not a clear confession. He cannot fully come to terms with his guilt, and if he is to blame, then all of America is to blame. Keller achieves the American Dream—an uneducated man who becomes wealthy and has a comfortable house and a nice family. But this dream looks futile when we identify Joe's endless quest for material comfort which causes the death of Larry and the destruction of Kate and Chris.

Hence, Arthur Miller has been successful in reflecting the rotten psychology of Joe Keller who is an allegory of the American way of life. At the end of the play, Joe Keller, in a state of frustration and hopelessness, decides to depart from this world in an unexpected way: suicide. Miller designs an open conclusion for Kate and Chris and it is not apparent what they will do in the future, but they have one. Though, it is not clear that they will carry the feelings of remorse for the rest of their lives. The miserable ending also establishes a challenge and an assurance of a better future. Miller highlights his belief that "there's a universe of people outside" (All My Sons, p.69) and we are all responsible for it. A narrow-minded observation of the world indeed encourages rebellious conduct that might lead to destruction, and it is also noticeable that the foremost notion that the past has a lasting inspiration on the present is reflected in All My Sons.

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