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## Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*: The Relationship between the Individual to Self and Individual to Society

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### Abstract

Pulitzer Prize winner, Arthur Miller, is the post-war American dramatist with whom American drama acquired new dignity and import. The question of public issues and private conscience is in fact, the main concern in the plays of Arthur Miller. In *All My Sons*, Miller's first important play, he shows the strong mutual relationship between individual and society. It is a family tragedy where the lives of the entire family are blighted by the crime of the father. It is a play about the individual's relationship to self and about the obligation he has to his society. Joe Keller, the protagonist, has wrong notions that are to get a prosperous business and a high standard life for his sons and wife. For the betterment of his family, he breaks off his connection from the society in which he lives. It is a play about an individual's selfishness and the socio-economic pressure of the so called highly commercialized society of America which compels him to violate the norms of the society. It is a social play which indicates that both individual and society are complementary to each- other. Joe shoots himself in the end of the play when he gets total rejection from his son for whom he did anti-social act.

**Keywords:** Social playwright, Socialism, Individualism, Social responsibility

Arthur Asher Miller was born on October 17, 1915 into an immigrant family in Manhattan. Miller grew up through the period of Depression (1930's) with the sharp sense of social injustice and dehumanization that comes with the loss of moral values. In his plays Miller has depicted the bitter realities of highly competitive society of America. As a sensitive interpreter, Miller has exposed the evils of his contemporary society in the fullest sense of term. In his plays *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and in *A Memory of Two Mondays* Miller has revealed, what he observed in society. In his first successful play *All My Sons* (1947), Miller's focus remains on the basic theme of the relationship between the individual

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to self and individual to society. *All My Sons* is a social play that deals with the theme of individual's dilemma to choose between self interest and the larger interest of the society. In this play Miller has attempted successfully for the first time to crust tragedy out of the hidden tensions and looming fears of the life of the American middle class. It is a representative play of the war time America and highlights the disasters of the World War II.

*All My Sons* is a play that depicts how personal individual guilt and responsibility not only become a matter for the individual but also have an important impact on the community or society in which he inhabits. Miller is of the view that there is a really a great harmony between individual and society. He used the analogy of interrelationship between fish and water to explain interrelationship between individual and society. Fish can't survive without water; similarly individual can't inhale or survive without his or her society. Miller States: "Society is inside man and man is inside society, the water is in the fish, the fish is in the water".<sup>1</sup> By this statement Miller seems to be in favour of a positive relationship between the individual and society. In *All My Sons* through the character of Joe Killer, the chief protagonist, Miller introduces a realistic product of the capitalist system of America. In this play Miller presents the conflicts and clash of ethics between individual and the social environment.

*All My Sons* concerns the story of Joe Keller, a well established manufacturer of aircraft engines who under pressure of war time production, knowingly shipped defected cylinder heads of airplane motor to the U.S. Army Air Force in World War II. Consequently, twenty one American pilots were killed in plane crash in Australia. Joe has wrong dream that is to get a prosperous family by hook or by crook. For him personal profit is supreme. He is the man who does not care for his wrong deed. The death of twenty-one pilots of P40s does not bring any thought of guilt or sadness to Joe. He is aware about the well being of his family only. Instead of repenting for his heinous crime, he implicates Steve Deever, his business partner, as a result of which Deever was made to suffer imprisonment. He tells a white lie to the investigating authorities that he had no information of the supplying of the defective cylinder heads. It was his partner Steve who was responsible for the tragic death of the pilots. Here again Joe commits his second crime by denying his responsibility and blames an innocent person.

Miller's *All My Sons* is a direct attack on American materialism—an ideal resulting in a conflict between individual notions of well being and social responsibility. In the play whatever wrong Joe did, he did for the sake of money and for stability in his business. Like other protagonists of Miller's plays, there is no vice in Joe's character, except littleness and his own self-centered outlook. Joe says good bye to his moral and social responsibility and breaks off all his relation from the outer world. Joe pretends to be innocent, but it is he who is the symbol of greed and betrayal in the society. Under the intoxication of wealth and prosperity he genuinely not visualizes the public consequences of what is for him a private

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deed. When he finds out that Kate, his wife; and Chris, his son; want him to send to prison for his wrong action, he cries out emphatically, "High the goddam country is gotta to go if I go."<sup>2</sup> He means to explain that the anti-social act that he committed was quite common among the people during war period

In *All My Sons* the tragedy arises out of the character of Chris Keller i.e.; Joe's son. Chris turns violent when he comes to know about the blunder committed by his own respectable father. The central theme of guilt and tragic punishment has been presented through the portrayal of Joe and Chris here. Both Larry and Chris, whom Joe loves more than the entire universe, become the medium of his doom. Larry, Joe's elder son, commits suicide when he comes to know about his father's offence. No doubt, Larry's suicide is a kind of revenge upon Joe. Before suicide Larry writes a letter to Ann, his fiancée; "I can't tell you how I feel---I can't bear to live any more.....Every day three or four men never come back and he sits there doing business."<sup>3</sup> Larry's letter produces such a shocking effect on Joe that he decides to shoot himself. Joe Killer comes before us as a selfish fellow as he disengages himself to mankind and engages himself only with his family more precisely to his sons, not to all the sons of the title but to the two sons whom he has fathered. What he utters just before he shoots himself is nothing but a heart- breaking confession: "Sure he was my son. But I think to them they were All My Sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were."<sup>4</sup>

Chris horrifies when he comes to know the bitter reality, that the real criminal in supplying faulty material to the Army Air Force was his own father not Steeve Deever. In a fit of anger he says: "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 the world?"<sup>5</sup> Chris pounds upon Joe's shoulders and weeps bitterly. After knowing the black truth of his father, he asks his mother Kate Keller to send him to prison. Like the heroes of the Greek tragedies, Chris gets ready to take avenged of the suicide of Larry and the tragic death of innocent pilots of P40s. While Joe justifies his action saying that he did wrong for better life of his sons. He confesses his sinful deed to Chris: "Chris I did it for you...For you, a business for you."<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, both of his sons do not accept his anti-social act. Larry commits suicide while Chris rejects him totally. The idea which Miller wants to portray here is that man cannot disown society for the well-being of his family. But Keller does this and he isolates himself from the society. He has wrong notions that his family could gain prosperity at the expense of society. Though Joe does not want to disconnect from the outer world but the way he connects himself with his family is harmful to the society.

With *All My Sons* Miller has highlighted the materialistic tendency of modern man and interpret the interrelatedness of individual and society---in simple words man's relationships with society and his family. An excess of love for his sons Larry and Chris makes Joe Miller succumb to the pressure of the society. The only aim of him is to provide

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enough money and a bright future to his loving sons. For Joe a good father means to provide financial stability to his Sons but most importantly his desire to pass a well going business on to his sons. He tells Chris: "What the hell did I work for? That's only for you' Chris the whole shooting match is for you." <sup>7</sup> Here Joe reminds of his duty as a father but he totally ignores his responsibility as a responsible citizen. Throughout the play Joe cannot identify himself with any images than familial ones. Joe commits suicide not because "They were All My Sons" but his own son, Larry kills himself deliberately out of shame for his father's anti-social act.

It has to be admitted here that *All My Sons* succeeds as a play chiefly because it shows that man cannot violet social setups for the sake of his own family. It is a social play. It is a play that illustrates the theme that man needs society to survive. In this play Joe does a blunder to gain prosperity and stability in business at the cost of the lives of others. He creates for himself a morally right world of illusion where his family enjoys the topmost priority. In this world of Joe, there is no place for social rules, guilt and social responsibility his cast of mind cannot admit that he personally, has any viable connection with his world his universe or his society."<sup>8</sup> Here, Miller has tried to show how the social crime is converted into personal, by the fact of the death of Joe's own pilot son Larry, and from this realization made social again. He takes a moral standpoint; and highlights the impact of false values on characters caught in the pulls and pressure of their personal duties. Consequently, they have to suffer unenviable. In *All My Sons* Joe Keller suffers blank misery in his heart. The following extract justifies the relevance of the argument where Joe confesses his crime: "... Everybody knew I was getting out that day; the porches were loaded. Picture it now; none of them believed I was innocent. The story was, I pulled a fast one getting myself exonerated. So I get out of my car, and I walk down the street. But very slow. And with a smile. The beast! I was the beast: the guy who sold cracked cylinder heads to the army Air Force: the guy who made twenty-one P-40s crash in Australia. Kid, walking down the street that day I was guilty as hell."<sup>9</sup>

In *All My Sons*, Joe is convincingly drawn as a father whose boundaries are determined by his family; whatever he does is motivated by a deep concern for his sons and wife. Benjamin Nelson evaluates Keller's family sickness as: "He has a fanatic allegiance to a dream on which his family centered. The tragedy occurs when he holds blindly to this dream and fails to recognize his place in society or when he gives up that place for the sake of his family dream."<sup>10</sup> With this play, Miller throws light on the peculiar conditions of modern life. In American society, conditions are more trying an insistent than in Africo-Asian countries. Americans are mad to get success. In their mad frenzy to succeed, they tend to ignore the governing laws of their society. Joe Keller is the product of the same society. To remain in business was the main concern of Joe. It is a well known fact that a highly materialistic society demands every -thing on time and delay in the fulfillment of the demand

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may create a disastrous effect on the future of a middle-class businessman. In order to save his business, Joe says goodbye to his morality and social responsibility. For Joe, there is no society more has there been one. Joe is guilty of an anti-social act which he did only to sustain his business. In a crucial speech he tells this to Chris: "I am in business, a man in the business a hundred and twenty cracked you are out of business, you got a process, the process don't well and they knock you out in five minute what could I do, Let them take forty years, let them take my life away."<sup>11</sup> Joe is called upon to play his role as a father to his sons on the one hand as a responsible citizen on the other, but his myopic vision and one sidedness ignores his role as a responsible citizen. Miller justifies this point as under, "In *All My Sons* Joe Keller is a father and citizen but because he could not play his role as a worthy citizen and violates the social- set up he became less of a father and destroyed his own offspring. You literally have to survive with this whole because you can't survive without it."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Joe is not proud of being a successful businessman or a self made man. He is proud of that he has a well going business for his sons. But when he comes to realize that his sons think there is something bigger than family, he has not overthrown sixty years of thinking and feeling in a minute and shoots himself. Joe commits suicide so that Chris need not kill himself. He knows that his sons, for whom he has lived, consider him an animal and do not want to survive with him in the same world. So he commits his second anti-social act. Miller has said of Joe that he feels justified in his supplying defected cylinder head because if his business had been destroyed, he would have had nothing to left for his sons and "that would be a fate worse than death because one of his psychological supports is that he is a provider..... the father of the house..... the man from whom all power and ...energy flows. Nonetheless, he does feel guilty about what he has done but at the same time feels that there was no other way for him..... It's craze guilt of motivations and contradictions inside him."<sup>13</sup>

In *All My Sons*, Miller has portrayed the fact that the pressure of any social action gets compounded and complicated too much, and then the individual in the responsibility sometimes gets so much unnerved that he turns a blind eye even for a while to any lapse that may have occurred. This is what Joe actually faced. It is a play about social relationship. Through the character of Joe Keller Miller shows his social responsibility as a writer. All the events described in Joe's family can be taken to represent at large the American middle -class family in general, which could not bear the shock and strain caused by the onslaught of depression and their financial stability began to disrupt. The play *All My Sons* thus illustrates how man's best qualities become involved with his worst action. This, then, is in part a play about repression, about the compromises, affected by individual's negotiating between private needs and public obligation. The central conflict between the individual and society creates tragedy in the play. Each individual has to confront his society. Here, Miller seems to preach that the individual must revolt against the rigidity and injustice of society but the violation of the social ethics for materialistic gaining is unpardonable. Miller interprets that

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there is an unbreakable relationship between individual and society. This play is a realistic exposition into the problems of the individual, who ambiguously, felt, but refused to accept calumny and turpitude.

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