


Materialism and Moral Accountability in *All My Sons*

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Abstract:

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* is a potent critique of materialism and reflects on moral responsibility in modern society. It highlights how economic survival and family loyalty lead to moral compromise and a contrasting vision of social responsibility and ethical accountability. The father-son conflict in the play portrays a deeper tension between private interest and collective obligation. This paper reflects how the play narrates a story of inseparable bond between the individual and the society. It argues that larger social forces shape individual actions and behaviours. The compelling portrayal of human values within the context of materialism reinforces a broader sense of moral responsibility during challenging times. It draws upon a normative perspective to expose the complexity of human behaviours affected by social structures/pressures. These concerns not only help in understanding the play as a critique of materialism, but also make it relevant in contemporary socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, Materialism, Moral Responsibility, Society, Capitalism.

All My Sons has received worldwide appreciation since its first production in 1947. Drawing upon the Ibsenite dramatic tradition, the play employs a realistic framework to explore ethical dilemmas arising within the domestic sphere. The depiction of familiar and enduring themes accords it the status of a universal play. The tragic dimension of the play reflects the hidden guilt and the inevitable consequences of one's actions. Through its realistic setting, the play exposes the psychological and social consequences of life in the aftermath of World War II. The destructive consequences of war extend beyond documented losses, profoundly affecting human relationships and undermining the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

The father-son relationship appears as a recurring leitmotif in Miller's dramatic oeuvre – the individual and society are deeply interconnected, where personal actions cannot be separated from their wider social implications. In Miller's plays, conflicts between materially driven fathers and morally conscious sons, exemplified by Joe Keller and Chris Keller, expose the tension between pragmatic survival and ethical idealism. Miller's Drama, as Christopher Bigsby observes, consistently locates private guilt within a wider social context (Bigsby 104).

It was Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* that prompted Arthur Miller to become a writer. Miller was bewildered by the complexity and the depth of Dostoevsky's novel. Moreover, it seems that Arthur Miller draws inspiration for the father-son conflict partly from *The Brothers Karamazov*. Miller states:

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 ruminate and decide, for the rock upon which one may stand without illusion, a free man. Yet the characters appear liberated from any systematic causation. (138)

The play is fundamentally structured around the conflict between familial obligation and social responsibility. The family, as the primary social unit, forms the foundation upon which society develops. In this context, *All My Sons* offers a powerful critique of a self-centred and materialistic way of life:

The thematic image of *All My Sons* is a circle within a circle, the inner depicting the family unit and the outer representing society, and the movement of the drama is concentric with the two circles revolving in parallel orbits until they ultimately coalesce. (Benjamin 81)

Joe Keller and Chris Keller in the play represent opposing attitudes towards life. Joe Keller is a practical man and seeks success and survival in a competitive materialistic world. In Darwinian terms, he seems to believe in the principle of the 'survival of the fittest'. This attitude shapes his actions even at the cost of moral compromise. In contrast, his sons, Chris and Larry, embody idealism and moral integrity. For both of them, the external world is marked by chaos and disorder, and ultimately moving towards destruction due to the erosion of ethical values. Though absent from the stage, Larry becomes a powerful moral presence. His suicide (upon discovering his father's involvement in the death of twenty one pilots) serves as the ultimate indictment of Joe Keller's actions. Chris is in love with Ann Deever, who was formerly engaged to his brother Larry. Chris (unlike his mother Kate Keller) accepts Larry's death as a reality. Kate, however, clings to the belief that Larry is still alive. Her conviction is partly grounded in her reasoning that the defective cylinder heads were meant for aircrafts with which Larry had no connection. Kate's emotional attachment is symbolically expressed through the planting of a tree in Larry's memory. The tree breaks in the very first scene of the play – an event that foreshadows the collapse of illusions. Joe Keller and Chris try their level best to persuade her to accept the truth of Larry's death.

However, the arrival of Ann Deever after a long absence intensifies the emotional atmosphere within the family. Chris and Ann confess their love for each other, but Kate strongly opposes their union insisting that Ann must continue to wait for Larry. Through these familial interactions, Miller demonstrates how family relationships reflect broader social structures and values.

Joe Keller, a self-made man, has worked hard to become a successful factory owner. Although the play does not explicitly narrate the hardships he faced, they can be deduced from his remarks about Chris. He tells Kate, "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" (Miller 120). This statement reflects his early struggles, not unique but rather familiar across different societies. A person who begins life under difficult conditions often develops a hardened and survival-oriented outlook. Joe Keller's worldview is grounded in rationalist and self-centered notions of life. He prioritises family over the nation and measures success in material terms. Like Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman*, he becomes trapped in the illusion of success. Joe attempts to justify his actions by arguing that military pressure compelled him to supply the defective cylinder heads. This attitude highlights his greed for personal benefit over national responsibility. It reveals a moral blindness shaped by materialistic ambition and the ethical contradictions embedded within modern capitalist society.

Joe Keller desires to secure prosperity for his family. He builds his business as a legacy to his sons. The economic success leads to his authority within the household. His eventual decline within the family marks a significant personal crisis. "I'm his father and he's my son," he tells Kate, "and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head!" (Miller 120). The statement suggests his inability to conceive a moral order beyond his family. Joe

Keller engulfs himself in family and fails to recognise society as an extended family.

Benjamin Nelson rightly comments:

In Joe Keller's eyes there is nothing dishonest in a plea to the two values upon which he has based his life: the worth of individual effort and the sanctity of family loyalty born of love. His second appeal extends beyond the individual and the family, but still is defined by the inner circle. (85)

This assessment presents Joe Keller as a typical father figure whose actions are shaped by familial obligations. He justifies his terrible behaviour under the guise of familial love. He does not perceive himself as solely responsible for his crime. Instead, Joe maintains that his actions stemmed not from personal greed but from a desire to safeguard his family's future and economic stability. Such a justification can be understood as an ideological excuse that hides or downplays the moral consequences of decisions made within a capitalist system. Arvin R. Wells asserts, "When his (Joe Keller) business seemed threatened, the question for him was not basically out of profit and loss; what concerned him was a conflict of responsibilities - his responsibility to his family... versus his responsibility to the unknown men, engaged in the social action of war, who might as a remote consequence suffer for his dishonesty" (47-48). In this context, Karl Marx opines:

The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary their social existence determines their consciousness. (Preface)

This perspective helps to study the play as a critique of capitalist materialism. As depicted in the play, economic survival and material success often override ethical responsibility in

modern society. Like this play, *Death of a Salesman* also offers a critique of modern society with a particular emphasis on family and moral failure. This approach situates individual actions within broader socio-economic and ideological structures.

On the other hand, Chris Keller is deeply shaped by his war experiences. His sheltered upbringing within the domestic sphere leaves him ill-equipped to confront the harsh realities of the external world. The contrast between the peace of home and the trauma of war transforms him into a disillusioned yet morally conscious individual. He admits, "I've been a good son too long, a good sucker" (Miller 69). This statement exemplifies his internal conflict with growing awareness. Chris learns the values of solidarity and collective responsibility during the war and experiences a sense of moral obligation towards fellow human beings. These reflections make him mature enough to recognize the absence of such values in civilian life. He is disturbed by the unchanged attitudes of society:

And then I came home and it was incredible... I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car... 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. (Miller 85)

This realization frustrates Chris Keller and leads him to question the wealth and success his father acquired under the pretext of protecting the family. He considers all of his comfort stained with guilt and bloodshed. This tension underscores a conflict between private gain and universal ethical responsibility. When he discovers his father's involvement in the crime, he responds with an intense moral outrage. He condemns Joe Keller in powerful terms: "I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me?... Don't you have a country? Don't you live in this world? What the hell are you?" (Miller 116).

Chris's reaction embodies an emotional outburst that aligns with the depth of his idealism. The pronouncement announces the collapse of earlier reverence for his father. He had once perceived Joe as a figure of authority and moral certainty that was almost equal to a divine stature. Knowing about his father's crime shatters this image and unveils his innocence and emotional vulnerability. On the other hand, Chris tells Ann, "I'm going to make a fortune for you!" (Miller 86), that exposes the complex nature of human existence. Alice Griffin argues that Chris possesses "a utopian view of the world" and he is "overtly optimistic, willing to please, gullible, and narrow-minded" (qtd. in Ghazal & Almasaeid 38). Further, he argues that Chris believes "simple charisma will carry over into real-world gains, which is a hopeless interpretation of how the capitalist system works" (38). Although Chris condemns his father's profit-driven actions, he remains attached to the material rewards generated by the family business. Ghazal and Almasaeid argue that Chris's idealism prevents him from suspecting his father and ultimately contributes to the erosion of social values: "Chris' idealism forbids him to suspect his father or even to jail him because of his cowardice; Chris contributes in destroying the values and morals rather than maintaining the advancement of society" (38). These contradictions suggest that Chris is not entirely free from capitalist ideology. At times, he expresses idealistic values while simultaneously pursuing material ambitions. This attitude reveals the pervasive power of materialist ideology and its ability to shape even those who seek to oppose it.

The rebellion of a son against his father is a familiar and recurrent theme in literature, yet *All My Sons* presents it within the specific context of war. The family operates as the central unit that forms an inner circle of relationships. This movement from the private to the public sphere envisions the interconnectedness of individual actions and social structures. Only through this broader moral awakening does Joe Keller come to recognise that the dead pilots were, in a symbolic sense, "all my sons."

The title's symbolism underscores the play's universal message that moral responsibility extends beyond the boundaries of the individual family to the wider human community. It does not only reflect personal guilt but also expands responsibility to encompass society at large. The play illustrates the decline of the nineteenth-century American ethos. The play suggests that the pursuit of individual success and familial interests often takes precedence over broader ethical responsibilities, a tendency that remains strikingly relevant in contemporary society. The father-son conflict, therefore, becomes emblematic of the tension between the myth of family and the myth of success. As Gerald Weales observes:

His [Joe's] death is more than a single man's punishment, for Joe Keller is a product of his society. He not only accepts the American myth of the privacy of the family, but he has adopted as a working instrument the familiar attitude that there is a difference between morality and business ethics. Joe Keller is a self-made man, an image of American success, who is destroyed when he is forced to see that image in another context – through the eyes of his idealist son. (97)

Thus, the play remains relevant and retains the same validity that it had at the time of its first production in 1947. The contrasting views of the American Dream held by Joe Keller and Chris Keller highlight the importance of morality, humanity, responsibility, and honesty. Joe Keller, in the end, finds himself without justification and takes his own life. He succumbs to the pressures of modern life that is too complex and demands a proper assessment of every act. The collapse of the Keller family highlights how materialistic yearnings intrude into every fabric of society. As Parker observes, "People themselves are commodified, valued not as people but instead as numbers, statistics, and cogs in an abstract economic machine" (193). The lives of twenty one pilots are subordinated to the economic interests of Keller's business. Joe Keller's decision to ship defective cylinder heads highlights the capitalist ideology that

usually privileges profit over human welfare. Ultimately, this leads to both social and familial destruction.

Therefore, the play attains universal significance by transforming a domestic tragedy into a broader critique of modern civilisation, with the household functioning as a microcosm of wider societal tensions.

Conclusion: Arthur Miller establishes himself as a powerful critic of the American Dream by depicting a materialistic society in which individual actions have far-reaching consequences for the wider community. The tragic character of Joe Keller reveals the moral decadence that results from the capitalist tendency to privilege private gain over social accountability. The play postulates that the consequences of personal unethical choices do not remain confined to the individual or the family; rather, their ripple effects extend to the larger social order. This moral decadence could be properly deciphered as a product of material conditions that emphasizes economic success over ethical responsibility. The analogy of father-son conflict in the play explores the struggle between pragmatism and idealism. Joe Keller's adherence to a narrow conception of familial duty contrasts with Chris Keller's broader ethical vision that is formed by his wartime experience. Consequently, this conflict exposes the moral bankruptcy of a value system that privileges material success over ethical responsibility. The play affirms the requirement of a universal moral community by defying the limitation of ethics in private domains. Moreover, the title of the play "All My Sons" is a symbolic expression which transforms the personal tragedy into a universal moral statement. Joe Keller's final moral awakening underscores the play's central message that social responsibility transcends private interests and that individuals remain accountable to the broader human community. His tragic end, therefore, signifies the crumbling of an entire

value system firmly rooted in materialism and self-interest. The play attains universal significance for its timeless message that addresses concerns of ethics and human conduct.

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